# CHAPTER 1: WHAT IS PERSONALITY?

This chapter introduces the field of personality by explaining the distinctive orientations of the field, its history and origins, its basic approaches, and some key recurring issues such as personal versus situational influences. Consistent with the whole approach of the text, this chapter builds on examples and concepts that students can readily comprehend.

Most students come to the study of personality eager to understand themselves and others. It is valuable to build upon their interests and gradually lead them to grasp and employ the sophisticated and rigorous concepts and methods of personality psychology. Relating theories back to current, real-life examples from the world around them helps students understand, retain, and appreciate the material.

## Possible Lecture Outline

1. The basic questions that personality psychologists seek to answer are: “What does it mean to be a person?” “How are we unique as individuals?” "What is the nature of the self?”
2. Personality psychology is the scientific study of psychological forces that make people uniquely themselves.
   1. Unconscious forces
   2. Ego forces
   3. A person is a biological being
   4. Conditioning and shaping forces
   5. Cognitive forces
   6. Traits, skills, and predispositions
   7. Spiritual forces
   8. Person-environment interaction
3. Because personality psychologists use scientific methods to test their theories, conclusions are much more reliable and valid (compared to those obtained from astrology, palm reading, physiognomy, and other pseudoscientific endeavors).
   1. Importance of data and statistics for scientific testing of many theories
   2. Distinction between correlation and causation
4. What are the sources of personality theories?
   1. Careful observation and deep introspection of insightful thinkers
   2. Systematic empirical research
      1. Deductive approach
      2. Inductive approach
   3. Concepts borrowed from other disciplines: note that knowledge gleaned from other disciplines may also be used to test present theories—for instance, if new advances in biochemistry show that one theory of personality is impossible, the theory must be reworked to be consistent with current biochemical knowledge.
   4. Most theories utilize some aspects of all three of these.
5. Preview of Eight Different Approaches to Studying Personality (Table 1.1)
   1. Psychoanalytic
   2. Neo-analytic/Ego
   3. Biological
   4. Behaviorist
   5. Cognitive
   6. Trait
   7. Humanistic/existential
   8. Interactionist
6. Brief History of Personality Psychology
   1. Theater and self-presentation
   2. Religion
   3. Evolutionary biology
   4. Testing
7. Modern Theories
   1. Gordon Allport: the search for underlying organizational properties, with a focus on the uniqueness and dignity of the individual
   2. Kurt Lewin: Gestalt tradition, integrative nature of perception and thought, a whole that is greater than the sum of the parts; believed in the importance of changing situations (dynamic systems)
   3. Henry Murray: integrated clinical issues with theory and assessment issues, emphasis on comprehensive orientation, longitudinal design
   4. Margaret Mead: anthropologist who highlighted the importance of cross-cultural comparisons
8. Issues to Be Addressed throughout the Course
   1. The importance of the unconscious
   2. The definition of the self
   3. Unique vs. general approaches to studying people
      1. Idiographic approach
      2. Nomothetic approach
   4. Male-female differences
   5. Personal vs. situational influences
   6. Cultural determinants of personality
   7. Usefulness of personality for understanding behavior
9. Personality in Context
   1. Authoritarian personality: traits often associated with masculinity, rigidness, defensiveness, cold
   2. Personality research is impacted by culture
   3. The Barnum effect

## Classroom Activities, Discussion Topics, and Projects

1. Ask students to define, in one paragraph, what is meant by the term “personality.” Students should be thorough yet precise. Have students read these paragraphs aloud and focus on the major points that are generally seen as important by your students. Have students save these paragraphs for comparison to each of the perspectives described in the book.
2. Have students describe themselves in a paragraph. Identify how much of what they say about themselves is personality-related and how much relates only to social roles and accomplishments. Discuss how these overlap and what distinguishes them. Be ready to discuss their tendency to describe their personality as a list of traits.
3. What were some of the most important early impacts and biases on personality study? Biological understanding of the times? Gender-related beliefs of the times? Religious beliefs and superstitions? What are the important influences today? Gender issues? Cross-cultural issues? Innovations in physiological measurement?
4. Have students write down and turn in questions they have about personality. (They may say things like, “Why are men like my boyfriend so aggressive and untrustworthy in love?”) Answer the questions, as appropriate, in lectures throughout the course. (This makes the course feel more relevant to the students’ lives.)
5. Have students write down a one-sentence description of each of the eight basic perspectives to be covered in the course (this works best if this is the first class period and the students have not yet read the introductory chapter). Have students share their responses before going briefly over the eight perspectives. Collect the students’ responses and save them to hand back at the end of the quarter/semester (students are often surprised to see how much they have learned).
6. Ask students to use three different words to describe their own personality and the personality of a close friend or family member. Have the students share what sorts of words they used. Is it difficult to select only three terms? Are the words used broad traits? Social roles? Specific skills? Ask students to have a friend or family member complete the same task (describing the student and himself or herself). At the next class period, ask students to compare and share with the class the similarities and differences in the words they used and the words used by the friend or family member. Do people see eye to eye on how they describe themselves and others?
7. Ask students to form small groups to generate and discuss popular proverbs and clichés about human nature. Examples may include: “Two heads are better than one”; “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks”; and “Better safe than sorry.” Have students discuss whether these ideas are valid, and what these proverbs and clichés tell us about the layperson’s views of personality.
8. Ask students to debate some of the topics introduced in Chapter 1 as basic themes in the study of personality. Students may break into two different teams which present different answers to questions such as: “Are men and women different?” “Is each person truly unique?” “How important is the situation versus personality?”

1. The Barnum effect refers to people’s willingness to interpret vague, general statements as personally meaningful interpretations of their personality. To impress upon students our tendency to do this, complete this exercise with students across two class sessions. It is important to do this activity before students have read Chapter 2. First, ask students to draw pictures of themselves (not just stick figures), and to write out the sentence “I am a student taking personality this term.” Have them turn this picture and sentence into you for your “brief analysis.” During the next class session, pass out the following typed statement to each student, or email the statement to each student separately before class:

*You enjoy change and variety in your life, but do not like to have things change too drastically. You are fairly ambitious, but sometimes worry about whether you are making the right choices in your life. Sometimes you are insecure, but you don’t think that other people realize this. You think a lot about your personal relationships because they are very important to you. You really value others’ opinions and strive to obtain others’ approval.*

In order to make it appear different students have received different analyses (if you hand them out in class), you can use several different colors of paper and ask the students to keep their analyses private. Ask students to rate how well the “analysis” of their drawing describes them (1 = very poor to 5 = excellent). Then poll the class to determine how many students felt the analysis was accurate. Chances are the majority of students will feel that the analysis was a reasonably good description of their personality. Finally, ask a few students to read their analysis. The students will realize they all received the same analysis and that they are experiencing the Barnum effect.

## Recommended Outside Readings

Allport, G. W. (1968). *The person in psychology: Selected essays.* Boston: Beacon Press.

Barenbaum, N. B., & Winter, D. G. (2008). History of Modern Personality Theory and Research. In O. P John, R. W.Robins, & L. A. Pervin (Eds.), *Handbook of personality: Theory and research* (3rd ed.). New York: Guilford Press.

Benjamin, L. T., Jr. (Ed.). (1988). *A history of psychology: Original sources and contemporary research*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Craik, K., Hogan, R., & Wolfe, R. N. (Eds.). (1993). *Fifty years of personality psychology*. New York: Plenum Press.

Gadlin, H., & Ingle, G. (1975). Through the one-way mirror: The limits of experimental self-reflection. *American Psychologist*. *30*, 1003–1009.

John, O. P., Robins, R. W., & Pervin, L. A. (Eds.). (2008). *Handbook of personality: Theory and research* (3rd ed.). New York: Guilford Press.

Loevinger, J. (1987). Study of personality as science. In *Paradigms of personality* (pp. 1–5;). New York: W.H. Freeman & Company.

Murphy, G. (1949). *Historical introduction to modern psychology* (Rev. ed.). New York: Harcourt, Brace.

Sahakian, W. S. (Ed.). (1968). History of psychology: A sourcebook in systematic psychology. Itasca, IL: F. E. Peacock.

## Films / Videos

*Personality Theories*. (2001). 30 minutes. Insight Media: 800-233-9910; [www.insight-media.com](http://www.insight-media.com). Using the example of a specific individual (Nelson Mandela), explores three different approaches to understanding personality.

*Theories of Personality*. (1994). 20 minutes. Insight Media: 800-233-9910; [www.insight-media.com](http://www.insight-media.com). Examines five theories of personality: psychoanalytic (Freud, Jung, Erikson, and Adler), humanistic (Maslow, May, and Rogers), social-learning (Pavlov, Thorndike, Bandura, and Skinner), cognitive (Kelly), and trait (Allport, Cattell, and Eysenck).

*Theories of Personality*. (1994). 28 minutes. Lucerne Media. <https://www.academicvideostore.com/publishers/lucerne-media>. Explains five major schools of thought on the development of personality: psychoanalytic theories, humanistic theories, trait theories, behavioral/ social learning theories, and cognitive theories.