# CHAPTER 2: HOW IS PERSONALITY STUDIED AND ASSESSED?

This chapter first explains the importance of careful measurement, then goes on to talk about reliability and validity. Response sets and other biases are explained. The chapter also describes 10 basic types of assessment and provides examples of each.

Instructors who spend more time on measurement issues or psychotherapeutic issues can complement this chapter with more material in lectures or discussion sections, since it is written and organized in an open, clear, and simple structure. At the other extreme, instructors who take a more theoretical approach can move quickly through this material.

Too many students are turned off (unnecessarily) by issues of measurement and statistics. Students are fascinated, however, when they see assessment as a tool to measure things that they are interested in measuring (such as precisely what makes someone charismatic). Remember also that the “Self-Understanding” boxes in Chapters 3–14 provide additional examples of personality assessment relevant to students’ lives.

## Possible Lecture Outline

1. Objective Assessment: measurement that is *not* dependent on the individual making the assessment
2. Subjective Assessment: measurement that relies on Interpretation by the individual making the assessment
   1. Problems with subjective assessment: observers may not agree in their judgments; even when they do agree, they may still be wrong.
   2. Advantages of subjective assessment: complex and rich phenomena may be examined and valuable insights gained.
3. Reliability is consistency in scores or ratings that are expected to be consistent; random variations in measurement are called “errors of measurement” or “error variance.” What about different ways of assessing reliability?
   1. Internal consistency and split-half reliability
   2. Cronbach’s coefficient alpha for internal consistency
   3. Test-retest reliability (measure of consistency over time)
4. But what happens when people change, or when our environments influence us in different ways? How can we then have reliable personality assessments?
   1. Look at personality as an underlying influence that affects behavior—that is, specific responses or behaviors might change over time, but consistent underlying *patterns* should be discernible.
   2. Look for consistency in the short term, but expect changes when looking over periods of many years. Also, expect to see some changes after life-changing transitions and/or traumatic events.
5. What is validity? Are we measuring what we are supposed to be measuring? Construct validity is ascertained by finding whether behaviors, attitudes, etc. that are theoretically relevant to the construct can be predicted by the measure.
   1. Convergent validity: a measure is related to what it should be related to
   2. Discriminant validity: a measure is not related to what it should not be related to
   3. Construct validity: the extent to which a test truly measures a theoretical construct
   4. Criterion-related validity: the extent to which a measure can predict important outcome criteria
   5. Content validity: the extent to which a measure accurately measures the domain it is supposed to
   6. Because proper test validation requires the establishment of several different types of validity and the assessment of various traits, it is called “the multitrait-multimethod perspective”
6. How does one choose items to include in a personality test?
   1. Items should discriminate among individuals with varying levels of the measured trait.
   2. Items should be intercorrelated, but not so highly that the items are overly redundant.
   3. The final assessment should have a normal distribution (individuals very high or very low, as well as in the middle, should be measurable with the test); Item Response Theory (IRT)
7. The Problem of Response Sets and What to Do about Them
   1. An acquiescence response set is the tendency for some people to be more likely to agree than disagree with anything you ask them.
      1. Some items should be reverse worded (reverse-coded) to help eliminate this bias.
   2. A social desirability response set is people’s tendency to present themselves in a favorable light.
      1. Present two or more items with equal social desirability.
   3. Lie scales may be used to pick up random response patterns, or those who are lying.
   4. It’s best to use several different methods of assessment, since none is without bias.
8. What about the problem of biases in psychological testing? All tests must make assumptions about the background, knowledge, and abilities of the person taking the test. Some of these assumptions will be incorrect. This doesn't mean the tests shouldn’t be used; it just means we must be careful in our interpretations and look at the context to which results are applied.
   1. Ethnic bias is one of the most common forms of bias—a characteristic that may be a strength in one culture is perceived as a weakness or deficiency in another.
   2. Gender bias is also common—characteristics that are strengths for one group, or that are simply not socialized for one group, are perceived as weaknesses or “missing” for another group.
9. What are the different kinds of personality tests?
   1. Self-report tests: these are usually pencil-and-paper tests (questionnaires). Some examples include the MMPI, ACT, NEO-PI, PRF, and MBTI.
   2. Q-sort: a special type of self-report test, which may be more flexible than the traditional questionnaire; the individual places cards, each with a descriptive word or term, into piles indicating how characteristic the descriptor is of him or her. The piles are arranged into a forced-normal distribution (that is, only a few of the cards can be placed in the “most characteristic” or “least characteristic” piles).
   3. Ratings and judgments: someone else fills out a questionnaire or answers questions about the target (participant); parents, teachers, friends, spouse, psychologist.
   4. Biological measures: early attempts included phrenology and body-typing, while some more modern variations include things like palm reading. More reliable forms of biological assessment include recording brain activity via electrodes, fMRI, EEGs, PET scans, levels of brain chemicals, and hormones.
   5. Behavioral observations: these include actually watching people perform various behaviors as well as experience sampling (such as having a person carry a beeper and then write down what he or she is doing each time the beeper goes off). Expressive behavior can be reliably coded.
   6. Interviews: these include unstructured interviews (which are more free and thus potentially more rich, but also more difficult to assess in terms of validity) and structured interviews (more valid, but also more likely to miss important individual nuances). In general, interviews of any type are easily biased by the preconceptions and behaviors of the interviewer.
      1. A nice example of a structured interview is the interview used to assess the Type A behavior pattern.
   7. Expressive behavior: this involves a careful analysis of how people do things—how they move or talk, for example—rather than what they do. Expressive style is often biased by cultural and gender-related factors.
   8. Document analysis: this technique involves careful analysis of an individual’s letters, diaries, etc. Writings such as these are most useful as supplements to other sources of information, but may be a rich source of data in their own right.
   9. Projective tests: these assessment tools require one to draw a picture, complete a sentence, tell a story about an ambiguous stimulus, or interpret an ambiguous stimulus. The goal is to gain access to unconscious motives and concerns, but again, there is a lot of room for bias in interpretation.
      1. Some good examples of projective tests include the Rorschach Inkblot Test, the Thematic Apperception Test, and the Draw-A-Person Test.
      2. The Implicit Associations Test can be viewed as a form of projective test that probes a person’s implicit attitudes.
   10. Demographics and lifestyle: this includes gathering information about the person’s age, place of birth, religion, family size, etc. Although these variables are not psychological in nature, they can aid in reaching a more complete understanding of the makeup of an individual.
   11. Online analysis of social media and Big Data: easy to gather large amounts of information on current focus and interest, network ties to others, unobtrusive; subject to self-presentation bias.
10. How Not to Test Personality
    1. Using the stars to understand personality (astrology) is rarely useful.
    2. Physical body measures such as phrenology are not valid.
    3. Palm reading, numerology, and handwriting analysis may be fun, but usually do not tell us very much about personality.
11. Research Designs
    1. Case studies
       1. A case study is an in-depth study of an individual.
       2. Different methods including document analysis, self-report measures, and assessments of expressive behavior may be used in combination to learn about an individual.
       3. Cannot be used to generalize to other individuals in a population.
    2. Correlational studies
       1. Correlational studies assess the degree of relationship between two variables.
       2. Correlations do not tell us anything about causal relationships.
    3. Experiments
       1. Experiments allow us to make inferences about causality.
       2. In a true experimental design, people are randomly assigned to either a treatment group or a control group, and then the two groups are compared.
       3. Quasi-experimental designs (naturally occurring experiments) are used when circumstances make it impossible (or very difficult) to randomly assign people to conditions.
12. What are some of the ethical issues in personality testing?
    1. Test results will always contain some “error,” and thus will always be somewhat inaccurate.
    2. When these tests are used to identify those who should be excluded from something (like school, medical treatment, etc.), these errors become very important.
    3. The fact that errors do occur should not preclude our making use of the psychological assessment tools that are available.
    4. Instead, we must be careful at many points in the assessment process:
       1. In our interpretation of test results
       2. When choosing how to apply our knowledge
       3. In the construction of new tests
       4. Open to revision of “tried and true” measures if new information becomes

## Recommended Outside Readings

Aiken, L. R. (1999). *Personality assessment: Methods and practices* (3rd ed.). Seattle: Hogrefe & Huber.

Campbell, D. T. (1960). Recommendations for the APA test standards regarding construct, trait, and discriminant validity. *American Psychologist*, *15*, 546–553.

Fiske, D. W. (1971). *Measuring the concepts of personality*. Chicago: Aldine.

Gould, S. J. (1996). *The mismeasure of man* (2nd ed.). New York: Norton. (Original work published 1981).

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

Tellegen, A. (1991). Personality traits: Issues of definition, evidence, and assessment. In D. Cicchetti & W. M. Grove (Eds.), *Thinking clearly about psychology: Essays in honor of Paul E. Meehl* (pp. 10–35). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

## Films / Videos

*Discovering Psychology: Understanding Research*. (2001). 30 minutes. Annenberg/CPB Multimedia Collection: 800-532-7637; [www.learner.org/](http://www.learner.org/). This is Part 2 of the *Discovering Psychology* series. This segment takes about 30 minutes. Provides a general overview of research methods in psychology (not specific to personality). Zimbardo is the “leader.”

*Personality*. (1971). 29 minutes. Libraries holding this title can be found at <http://www.worldcat.org/oclc/36906516>. This is from the Psychology Today series, and looks at how college students’ views of self differ from the opinions of their parents and friends. Describes various kinds of personality evaluations.

*Personality Traits and Assessment*. (2001). 30 minutes. <https://www.academicvideostore.com/video/personality-traits> Libraries holding this title can be found at <http://www.worldcat.org/oclc/704679307>. Explores how psychological tests attempt to measure personality.