CHAPTER 7: COGNITIVE ASPECTS OF PERSONALITY

This straightforward chapter applies basic cognitive notions to personality, and thus includes Kurt Lewin’s field theory, field dependence, schema theory, constructs, scripts, and attributions. The main classic theorist is George Kelly, and the modern counterparts are attributional models of helplessness (e.g., Seligman). Significant attention is given to Julian Rotter’s notions of locus of control and social learning, and self-regulation processes are discussed. Bandura’s social-cognitive learning theory is presented in detail as a sophisticated modern theory that integrates many key cognitive and behavioral notions. The chapter ends with a brief overview of modern conceptualizations of human information processing and the similarities and differences between humans and computers in terms of thought processing and personality. Although some texts include some of these matters in a behaviorist/learning chapter, we find that many students understand this material better *after* they understand the work of Pavlov, Skinner, and Dollard and Miller.

Possible Lecture Outline

1. Perception and Cognition as the Core of Personality
   1. Roots in Gestalt psychology
      1. We seek meaning in our environments.
      2. We organize sensations into meaningful perceptions.
      3. Complex stimuli cannot be reduced to the sum of their parts.
      4. Gestalt = pattern or configuration
   2. Lewin’s field theory
      1. Life space
      2. Focus on issues related to separateness of different areas of the life space
      3. Contemporaneous causation
      4. Field-dependent people are easily influenced by the context or “field” in which they are functioning.
      5. Field dependence as a personality variable
   3. Rod-and-frame task
   4. First explored as a personality variable by Witkin and Asch
   5. Some of the demonstrated associations with field dependence are:
      1. Children’s play preferences
      2. Socialization patterns
      3. Career choices
      4. Preferred interpersonal distance during conversation
      5. Level of eye contact
   6. Small, consistent gender differences (women more field dependent)
   7. Field dependence also shown to vary cross-culturally
   8. Other, similar cognitive style variables are related to personality.
      1. Cognitive complexity is defined as the extent to which a person comprehends, utilizes, and is comfortable with distinctions or separate elements into which an entity or event is analyzed, and the extent to which the person can integrate these elements by drawing relationships among them.
      2. Learning style, which is a person’s characteristic way of approaching a task or a skill, varies in a number of ways.
2. Schema theory
   1. Piaget proposed that children understand the world through cognitive structures called “schemas” that build upon one another as the child develops (adults have schemas, too).
   2. Schemas play an important role in determining how we think and act.
      1. “Script” is a schema for a familiar ritual.

c. Categorization: organizing our experiences by grouping into categories

1. Ability to glean rich information from fleeting facial expressions
2. The step from useful category to dangerous stereotype is small.

1. Confirmation bias is seen in the use of stereotypes.

d. Control of attention is an important factor which allows us to function efficiently.

1. We notice salient environmental features and combine these with our current goals to decide where to direct our attention.
2. Individual differences in attention: To what degree is attention under conscious control?
3. People (especially school-aged children) who have atypical attentional processes are often diagnosed as having ADHD (attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder).
4. Interpersonal relationships strongly affected by cognitive factors; rejection sensitivity theory
5. Humans as Scientists
   1. Kelly’s Personal Construct Theory posits that people are like scientists, actively trying to discover the world around them (a constructivist view); people are amateur personality theorists
   2. Behavior is guided by interpretations of events and expectations of future events.
   3. Kelly believed each person’s system of constructs is different, and thus each person has a unique personality “theory.”
      1. Role Construct Repertory Test (Rep Test) assesses an individual’s personal construct system.
6. Social and emotional intelligence: people differ in interpersonal skills, just like they differ on all sorts of other dimensions.
   1. There is a cluster of abilities that is important for successfully relating to others.
   2. The ability to recognize and interpret emotions in the self and others leads to success.
   3. A similar idea is proposed by Gardner’s “multiple intelligences” theory.
7. Explanatory Style as a Personality Variable
   1. Explanatory style: characteristic way of interpreting life events (e.g., optimism vs. pessimism)
      1. An optimistic explanatory style is generally more adaptive, although excessive or inappropriate optimism isn’t healthy.
      2. People with an optimistic explanatory style usually deal with stress more successfully (often take an information-seeking and situation-/self-monitoring approach).
8. Learned Helplessness and Learned Optimism
   1. Seligman describes learned helplessness as a situation in which one learns that negative events can’t be avoided.
      1. Belief learned through repeated, uncontrollable exposure to negative events
      2. Belief persists even when a negative event is later avoidable.
   2. Optimism can also be learned.
      1. Training to alter thinking about themselves and their situations
      2. Develop healthier responses
9. Rotter’s Social Learning and Locus of Control Approaches
   1. Behavior depends upon outcome expectancy and reinforcement value.
   2. Behavior potential: likelihood that a behavior will be performed in a particular situation
      1. Generalized expectancies carry more weight in novel situations.
      2. Specific expectancies are used in familiar situations.
   3. Rotter’s six psychological needs that stem from biological needs (these are satisfied by secondary reinforcers):
      1. Recognition-status
      2. Dominance
      3. Independence
      4. Protection-dependency
      5. Love and affection
      6. Physical comfort
   4. “Psychological situation” represents an individual’s unique set of potential behaviors, outcome expectancies, and reinforcement potential.
   5. Locus of control (internal vs. external): beliefs about one’s ability to affect outcomes
      1. More recently, reconceptualized as three semi-orthogonal dimensions
         1. Luck
         2. Powerful others
         3. Internality
10. Bandura’s Social-Cognitive Learning Theory
    1. Self-system: set of cognitive processes a person uses to perceive, evaluate, and regulate his or her own behavior, making it functionally efficient and appropriate
    2. Observational learning (also called vicarious learning or modeling): learning a behavior by watching another rather than performing it oneself (illustrated with Bobo Doll studies)
    3. May or may not perform learned behavior
       1. Outcome expectancies important in determining performance of learned behavior
       2. Complexity of the behavior, attributes of the model, and attributes of the observer also play a role in determining whether or not a learned behavior is performed.
    4. Observational learning explains how we can learn to inhibit unacceptable behavior without first performing it.
    5. Observational learning requires four components:
       1. Attention
       2. Retention
       3. Motor reproduction
       4. Motivation
    6. Self-efficacy: expectancy about one’s own ability to be successful; determines whether we try to act at all, how long we persist in difficult times, and how successes and failures affect our future behavior; based on four kinds of information
       1. Personal performance experiences
       2. Vicarious experiences
       3. Verbal persuasion
       4. Emotional reactions
    7. Self-regulation: the process by which people can control their own achievements and actions
       1. Self-efficacy is a component of this process.
       2. This construct focuses on internal control (from within the individual) of behaviors.
       3. Human agency: the capacity of a person to exercise control not only over his or her actions, but also over internal thought processes and motivations
       4. Groups can exhibit “collective efficacy.”
11. Humans as Computers: Artificial Intelligence
    1. Is simulating cognitive tasks the same thing as creating a personality? No.
       1. Personality-like characteristics can be programmed.
       2. We may tend to make “personality” attributions even when no “personality” exists.
          1. The Turing test

Classroom Activities, Discussion Topics, and Projects

* + - 1. How does our innate tendency to categorize things interact with our tendency to stereotype? Are stereotypes ever good? What functions can stereotypes serve? Why is it that stereotypes are so often self-perpetuating? Can stereotypes create self-fulfilling prophecies?
      2. How do we diagnose attention deficit disorder (ADD) and attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)? Are these disorders over-diagnosed? Can these problems be “fixed,” or are they stable, trait-like characteristics? What are the pros and cons of treating ADD and ADHD with drugs?
      3. Have students take a shortened version of Kelly’s Role Rep Test, and discuss the findings.
      4. Have students take an Embedded Figures Test. Discuss situations in which being field dependent would be advantageous, and situations in which it would be preferable to be field independent. Have students integrate the information on conditioning from Chapter 6 with the idea of field independence/dependence—that is, what kind of person might be expected to have a more malleable personality (if, in fact, “personality” is behavior)?
      5. Have students write out a detailed “script” for a first date. Compare within the class to see how closely these scripts match. Discuss how the schemas and scripts we have influence our perception of the world and influence who we are.
      6. Ask students to think about the construct of social intelligence. How is this construct distinct from academic intelligence (“book smarts”)? Are these constructs mutually exclusive? Have students come up with indicators of social intelligence. In other words, what sorts of capabilities do you expect from someone who possesses social intelligence? Having students complete a measure of social intelligence may also help to clarify this construct for them.
      7. As part of a discussion about Albert Bandura and observational learning, ask students to list certain skills and habits they have learned from their parents through observational or vicarious learning. Some examples may include: how to drive, how to cook, how to fix a car, and childcare tasks. How were these behaviors modeled? Are there any behaviors students have learned from their parents through observational learning that their parents would not have wanted them to adopt (e.g., smoking, cursing)? If children learn negative or unhealthy behaviors from watching their parents, what implications does this have for parents’ responsibility to modify their behaviors?
      8. Discuss Julian Rotter’s theory concerning the importance of locus of control. Have students complete the items on the following page to determine if they have an internal or external locus of control. These items were created for this Instructor’s Manual, but are adapted from Rotter’s (1971) original measure.
      9. Ask students to compare and contrast the hierarchy of needs of Abraham Maslow to the six psychological needs of Julian Rotter. Have them determine if the two theories are distinct from each other or are variants of each other, and ask them to apply these theories to their own lives.
      10. Initiate a class discussion that broadens the focus of the “Sharpen Your Thinking” box on the effects of violent videogames to have students consider the issue of what responsibility (if any) lies with society as a whole to discourage the modeling and glorification of violence and other antisocial behaviors. Bring in questions of media treatment of school shootings, the ethics of advertising R-rated movies in ways that are aimed at children and teens, and the ways in which tobacco and alcohol are advertised and positioned.

Locus of Control Measure

For each numbered item, decide whether statement A or statement B more closely describes you.

1. A) I believe that studying for a test is the best way to ensure getting a good grade.

B) Even if I study for a test, I won’t necessarily do well; too many other factors come into play.

2. A) I have always felt that I can do anything I put my mind to.

B) I believe there is a plan for me, even if I don’t know what it is.

3. A) I am convinced that I will be successful in my career if I am persistent.

B) I hope to get a “big break” that will put my career on the right track.

4. A) In order to maintain close friendships, it is sometimes necessary to put forth effort and work to maintain effective communication.

B) Your friends like you for who you are; there is little you can do to affect that.

5. A) I think it is every citizen’s responsibility to get involved in their government and be active in politics.

B) Even though government is designed to be “for the people,” I think very few people truly have influence over government affairs.

6. A) There is no such thing as destiny.

B) Life has a way of working out all on its own.

7. A) Life is what you make of it.

B) God ultimately decides what will become of us; we should just do our best to be kind to each other.

8. A) When I get an A on a test, I know it is because I have studied hard.

B) When I get an A on a test, I am thankful the professor selected reasonable test items.

9. A) Most people can be easily influenced if you are assertive in trying to change their opinions.

B) I rarely am able to change people’s minds about important issues.

Scoring for the Locus of Control Measure

Count up the number of items where option A was chosen and the number where option B was chosen. For every item, option A is the more internal and option B the more external. A strong predominance of A choices reflects an individual whose locus of control is highly internal, a strong predominance of B choices reflects an individual whose locus of control is highly external, and an approximately equal split reflects an individual whose locus of control is a mix of internal and external.

Recommended Outside Readings

Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. New York: W. H. Freeman.

Cantor, N., & Kihlstrom, J. F. (1987). *Personality and social intelligence*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Gailliot, M. T., Mead, N. L., & Baumeister, R. F. (2008). Self-Regulation. In O. P. John, R. W. Robins, & L. A. Pervin (Eds.), *Handbook of personality: Theory and research* (3rd ed.). New York: Guilford Press.

Hastorf, A. H., & Cantril, H. (1954). They saw a game: A case study. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, *49*, 129–134.

Kelly, G. A. (1969). *Clinical psychology and personality: The selected papers of George Kelly*. Edited by Brendan Maher. New York: Wiley.

Mischel, W. (1973). Toward a cognitive social learning reconceptualization of personality. *Psychological Review*, *80*, 252–283.

Rotter, J. B. (1966). Generalized expectancies for internal vs. external control of reinforcement. *Psychological Monographs*, *80*(609).

Seligman, M. E. P. (2006). *Learned optimism*. New York: Vintage Books.

Walker, B. M., & Winter, D. A. (2007). The elaboration of Personal Construct Psychology. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *58*, 453–477.

Films / Videos

*Albert Bandura*. (1988). 28 minutes (Part I) and 29 minutes (Part II). Insight Media: 800-233-9910; [www.insight-media.com](http://www.insight-media.com). Bandura himself describes his approach to the study of personality and compares it to other approaches. Part I includes discussion of how he developed his theories, behavior modification, and social learning. Part II covers the Bobo doll research, morality, and violence in the media.

*Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory: An Introduction*. (2003). 30 minutes. <https://www.academicvideostore.com/video/banduras-social-cognitive-theory-introduction>. Libraries holding this title can be found at <http://www.worldcat.org/oclc/53354850> . Explores Bandura’s theories as they developed over many decades. Includes original footage of Bandura’s early work and current materials.

*The Diagnosis and Treatment of Attention Deficit Disorder in Children*. (1995). 27 minutes. Libraries holding this title can be found at <http://www.worldcat.org/oclc/707970601> . Looks at the behavior of children with ADHD at home, in regular schools, and in a specialized alternative school for children with the disorder. Discusses drug and behavioral treatments. Includes commentary by psychiatrists Ratey and Hallowell, who are prominent in this field.

Jean Piaget (1969). 40 minutes. <https://www.academicvideostore.com/video/jean-piaget>. Part 1 explores Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development and looks at traditional notions of motivation, learning, and perception. In Part 2, Piaget discusses Freud's psychological theories, Jensen's report on intelligence, and the criticisms of his theories.

*Learned Helplessness*. (2008). 16 minutes. Insight Media: 800-233-9910; [www.insight-media.com](http://www.insight-media.com). In this program, Betsy Sparrow of Columbia University examines the psychological concept of learned helplessness and considers the factors that influence the development of the condition. Sparrow discusses the two ways in which learned helplessness is demonstrated; highlights the important roles of control and predictability; introduces the concept of attributional style; and presents techniques for overcoming learned helplessness.