

The Five-Factor Model and Trait Theory: A Question of Innovation versus Tradition

The Five Factor Model (FFM) of personality, developed by J.M. Digman in 1990, is a more current theory propped by a conceptual model used to describe and measure human personality. These five factors, which include neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness, are used to illustrate the components of one's personality—but provide no insight into any causal factors that may effect how these personality traits are actually applied. Other empirical methods of measuring personality, such as Hans Eysneck's E-IN model (which only includes extraversion/introversion and neuroticism), for instance, have found little importance in each of the Big Five, questioning the validity of whether or not the factors of this theory are indeed the *most* useful in determining one's personality. Furthermore, the FFM "theory" might not actually be considered a theory due to the culturally and situationally dependent nature of it; more specifically, in order for the tenets of the FFM model to be considered valid, it is important that it show the relevance of the measured personality traits to the consequent behavior that stems from a particular measure. Because this model lacks insight into what the scoring of the Big Five signify, particularly in terms of behavior, it is questionable whether or not such precepts constitute a theory—or merely a mode of classification.

The trait theory, on the other hand, identifies commonly found traits in leaders and what roles these traits play in producing effective leadership. Moreover, this approach emphasizes that the traits that leaders possess must be pertinent to situations in which the leader is operating, as articulated by Ralph Stogdill (Milburn, 1983). With regard to the trait theory, Stogdill conducted several surveys which ultimately showed that the "average individual in the leadership role is

different from an average group member in the following ways: intelligence, alertness, persistence, self-confidence, and sociability” (Northouse, 2007). Unlike the Five Factor Model, however, Stogdill recognized that such qualities are not the sole explanation of one’s personality, but rather explained *what* the measures of these factors indicate and how the demands of certain situations inevitably influence them (Milburn, 1983). Thus, the theory approach combines traits to behavior and behavior to situations—while the FFM trails behind with an uncorroborated definition of the composition of one’s personality.

We can explore the shortcomings of the FFM through greater discussion and examination of the firmly supported traditional trait theory. As previously mentioned, the FFM simply measures the factors that encompass one’s personality, but makes no indication regarding the behavioral relevance of these outcomes. More studies referencing the trait theory, as conducted by Jennings and Newstetter, for instance, have shown strong evidence against the operation of measurable traits in determining social interactions (Wren, 1995). This support elicits the question of how valid merely “measuring” traits such as extraversion in the FFM are in presenting any true indication of this characteristic, without any confirmation that an individual is in fact sociable or assertive at all. Moreover, the FFM claims that it works in accordance with Freud’s psychoanalysis, which is based on the idea that individuals are unaware of the factors that cause their behavior or emotions (Beystehner, 1998). With that said, we are able to question whether or not one actually possesses these “innate” characteristics, or rather such results hail from the natural self report bias that one might have from taking a self-administered test. Therefore, whereas Stogdill’s numerous studies *observed* the effect of one’s inherent traits on their behavior (more specifically, in terms of leadership), the subjectivity of the FFM provides no testimony as to whether or not the traits in one’s score are actually possessed—deeming this model narrow-

minded and somewhat unreliable. The tenets of the traditional trait theory, however, are long established as useful in terms of identifying one's characteristics and explaining what such characteristics indicate.

References

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