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## Whole Trait Theory

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## ABSTRACT

Personality researchers should modify models of traits to include mechanisms of differential reaction to situations. Whole Trait Theory does so via five main points. First, the descriptive side of traits can be conceptualized as density distributions of states. Second, it is important to provide an explanatory account of the Big 5 traits. Third, adding an explanatory account to the Big 5 creates two parts to traits, an explanatory part and a descriptive part, and these two parts can be recognized as separate entities that are joined into whole traits. Fourth, Whole Trait Theory proposes that the explanatory side of traits consists of social-cognitive mechanisms. Fifth, social-cognitive mechanisms that produce Big-5 states should be identified.

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*"To the situationist I concede that our theory of traits cannot be so simpleminded as it once was. We are now challenged to untangle the complex web of tendencies that constitute a person, however contradictory they may seem to be when activated differentially in various situations."*

[Allport, 1968, p. 47]

*"We do not wish to quarrel over the use of a term ['trait'] and are quite ready to recognize the existence of some common factors which tend to make individuals differ from one another on any one test or on any group of tests. Our contention, however, is that this common factor is not an inner entity operating independently of the situations in which the individuals are placed but is a function of the situation in the sense that the individual behaves similarly in different situations in proportion as these situations are alike, have been experienced as common occasions for honest or dishonest behavior, and are comprehended as opportunities for deception or honesty."*

[Hartshorne &amp; May, 1928, p. 385]

## 1. Introduction

These two quotes are fascinating for a number of reasons. Allport's quote was in 1968 – a momentous date both because it was near the end of Allport's career and also because of Mischel's

(1968) *Personality and Assessment*, which argued against the validity of traits. Allport's use of the word "concede" is significant and the concession is remarkably to the situationist. Near the end of his career, Allport acknowledges that the situationist has persuasively argued that we need to change the notion of a trait. Specifically, traits have to include mechanisms explicating reacting to different situations with different behaviors.

The Hartshorne and May (1928) quote is at the end of their book, on p. 385. It represents their summary conclusion after full consideration of the evidence from their seminal study of cross-situational consistency in the moral behavior of children. Conversely to Allport, however, Hartshorne and May are "quite ready to recognize" traits. They have been convinced that there are general traits that make individuals respond differently from each other. However, they believe their evidence made a strong case that models of traits must include in them mechanisms concerning differential behavioral reactions to different situations.

Despite the common perception that the authors are on opposing sides of the great trait debate, these two quotes say nearly the same thing. They are not at odds with each other; in contrast, they appear to have come to the same conclusion after considerable reflection. This similar conclusion is a description of how researchers in personality psychology should go forward. Namely, personality researchers need to modify models of traits such that they include mechanisms of differential perception and reaction to situations. Now, 90 years after Hartshorne and May's quote, and 50 years after Allport's quote, we believe the field is ready to go forward in their suggested direction. We believe, moreover, that Whole Trait Theory outlines such a roadmap for the field to follow.

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This is because future models of traits should have social-cognitive mechanisms as the main constituent of the explanatory component of traits, and should have distributions of manifestations according to the Big 5 as the descriptive part of traits. Whole Trait Theory is presented as a theory that encapsulates this position.

## 2. Which approach to personality is best: social-cognitive or trait?

Two approaches to personality psychology have defined the two sides of the great trait debate. These approaches generally have operated independently of each other while maintaining a degree of prominence in the modern period of the field (Fleeson, 2012). They have been considered competitors largely because they take two different stands on the degree of cross-situational consistency in behavior. The social-cognitive approach takes cross-situational consistency to be relatively low, and thus infers that social-cognitive mechanisms of situation interpretation are the best way to understand personality. The trait approach takes cross-situational consistency to be relatively high, and thus infers that traits are the best way to understand personality.

Both approaches have made important advances in understanding personality (Fleeson, 2012), verifying their importance to the field. The social cognitive approach starts with the observation that trait manifestations appear to be inconsistent (Cervone, 2005; Hartshorne & May, 1928; Mischel, 1968). For example, the same individuals will sometimes act conscientiously and other times carelessly (Mischel & Peake, 1982). If behavior is so inconsistent, describing individuals with broad trait terms such as conscientious seems pointless and inaccurate. Rather, individual differences will be in social-cognitive variables. For example, individuals will differ in the encodings of situations, in their expectancies, competencies, self-regulatory plans, and goals (Allport, 1937; Mischel, 1973; Mischel & Shoda, 1995). These social-cognitive variables are responsible for behavior, and because the social-cognitive variables are highly sensitive to situations, behavior will be highly sensitive to situations.

The trait approach, as instantiated in the Big 5/HEXACO model (Ashton & Lee, 2009; Costa & McCrae, 2006; DeYoung, Weisberg, Quilty, & Peterson, 2013; Goldberg, 1992; Johnson, 1997; Perugini & Gallucci, 1997; see also Wright et al., 2013), has made remarkable progress in identifying the content of broad traits and in providing evidence for their existence. There is strong evidence that the universe of traits can be organized into a hierarchical structure, with the six traits of extraversion, agreeableness, honesty/humility, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and intellect (the “Big Five”) at a middle hierarchical level (John, Naumann, & Soto, 2008). Thus, a good description of a person's personality can be achieved by indicating the person's level on these traits. Because of the hierarchical nature of the Big 5, such descriptions are relatively rich. For example, describing a person as conscientious means that he or she is careful, thorough, diligent, responsible, organized, and not careless, lazy, sloppy, nor reckless. Evidence for the Big 5 includes strong cross-questionnaire (Costa & McCrae, 2006) and cross-cultural replicability (Saucier, 2009). Traits matter to important outcomes (Duckworth, Weir, Tsukayama, & Kwok, 2012; Ozer & Benet-Martínez, 2006; Roberts, Kuncel, Shiner, Caspi, & Goldberg, 2007; Turiano, Chapman, Gruenewald, & Mroczek, 2013), and observers agree about Big 5 levels of targets (Vazire, 2010).

As much as the two approaches have accomplished, they also have areas in which they have achieved very little. Although traits are great descriptors of individual differences, there is a need for an explanatory account of traits. There has long been a call to explain where traits come from, how they operate, and how they produce differences in behavior. This is because traits, and especially the Big

5 traits, are mostly atheoretical and non-explanatory (Cramer et al., 2012; Hampson, 2012). In short, trait theory has described the *what*, but few theories have attempted to explain the *why* or *how* (with a few, mostly biological, exceptions, e.g., Depue & Collins, 1999; DeYoung, 2010; DeYoung et al., 2010; Eysenck, 1997; Gray, 1981; see also DeYoung, this volume; Read et al., 2010). Furthermore, although traits do a reasonable job of describing behavior and identity, even on that front they fall somewhat short (McAdams & Pals, 2006).

Specifically, they do not provide a full account of how individual differences in traits are manifest in behaviors. Many studies have shown specific behavioral correlates of traits, but there is not a conceptual account of how a trait label translates into accounts of daily behavior. For example, it is not known what describing someone as extraverted means for how extraverted he or she is in daily life and how much he or she deviates from extraversion.

The social-cognitive approach has the corresponding opposite weakness. Although such approaches suggest an explanation for personality variables, they have not yet explicitly identified the individual differences the theories should be used to explain. Whatever ways people turn out to differ, social-cognitive approaches argue that the causes of those differences will be social cognitive mechanisms such as encodings, expectancies, and self-regulatory plans. For social-cognitive approaches to achieve their potential, they need a descriptive account of personality to explain (Baumert & Schmitt, 2012).

## 3. Whole Trait Theory

Whole Trait Theory is designed to address this circumstance by taking advantage of the strengths of the trait approach and of the social-cognitive approach. It is also designed to ameliorate the weaknesses of the two approaches. It does so by recognizing that the weakness of each approach is the corresponding strength of the other. Moreover, Whole Trait Theory recognizes that the two perspectives not only can be brought together, but appear to be logically implicative of each other. Fortunately, Whole Trait Theory is joined in this endeavor by theories engaged in at least partially overlapping activities (Baumert & Schmitt, 2012; Bleidorn, 2009; Cramer et al., 2012; Denissen, van Aken, Penke, & Wood, 2013; DeYoung, this volume; Little & Joseph, 2007; Perunovic, Heller, Ross, & Komar, 2011; Read et al., 2010; Snow, 2009).

Whole Trait Theory makes five primary points, as shown in Table 1. Whole Trait Theory starts with the assertion that *the descriptive side of traits is best thought of as density distributions of states* (Baird, Le, & Lucas, 2006; Church et al., 2013; Fleeson, 2001, 2012; Fleeson & Wilt, 2010; Judge, Simon, Hurst, & Kelley, 2013). The description afforded by the Big 5 factor analyses was incomplete, because it did not indicate what people with a given trait level looked like in regard to that trait's manifestation in daily life. Density distributions are distributions of the frequency of manifesting the particular trait at each level of the trait. The density distributions approach completes the Big 5 description

**Table 1**  
Five main assertions of Whole Trait Theory.

1. The descriptive side of traits is best thought of as density distributions of states
2. It is important to provide an explanatory account of the Big 5
3. Adding an explanatory account to the Big 5 creates two parts to traits, an explanatory part and a descriptive part, and these two parts are distinct entities that nevertheless can be joined into whole traits because one of the parts is the causal consequence of the other part
4. The explanatory part of traits consists of social-cognitive mechanisms
5. What needs to be done next is to identify social-cognitive mechanisms that produce Big-5 states

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