

# Module 58

## Trait Theories

### Module Learning Objectives

- 58-1** Explain how psychologists use traits to describe personality.
- 58-2** Describe personality inventories, and discuss their strengths and weaknesses as trait-assessment tools.
- 58-3** Identify the traits that seem to provide the most useful information about personality variation.
- 58-4** Discuss whether research supports the consistency of personality traits over time and across situations.



#### **58-1** How do psychologists use traits to describe personality?

Rather than focusing on unconscious forces and thwarted growth opportunities, some researchers attempt to define personality in terms of stable and enduring behavior patterns, such as Sam Gamgee's loyalty and optimism. This perspective can be traced in part to a remarkable meeting in 1919, when Gordon Allport, a curious 22-year-old psychology student, interviewed Sigmund Freud in Vienna. Allport soon discovered just how preoccupied the founder of psychoanalysis was with finding hidden motives, even in Allport's own behavior during the interview. That experience ultimately led Allport to do what Freud did not do—to describe personality in terms of fundamental **traits**—people's characteristic behaviors and conscious motives (such as the curiosity that actually motivated Allport to see Freud). Meeting Freud, said Allport, "taught me that [psychoanalysis], for all its merits, may plunge too deep, and that psychologists would do well to give full recognition to manifest motives before probing the unconscious." Allport came to define personality in terms of identifiable behavior patterns. He was concerned less with *explaining* individual traits than with *describing* them.

Like Allport, Isabel Briggs Myers (1987) and her mother, Katharine Briggs, wanted to describe important personality differences. They attempted to sort people according to Carl Jung's personality types, based on their responses to 126 questions. The *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)*, available in 21 languages, has been taken by more than 2 million people a year, mostly for counseling, leadership training, and work-team development (CPP, 2008). It offers choices, such as "Do you usually value sentiment more than logic, or value logic more than sentiment?" Then it counts the test-taker's preferences, labels them as indicating, say, a "feeling type" or "thinking type," and feeds them back to the person in complimentary terms. Feeling types, for example, are told they are sensitive to values and are "sympathetic, appreciative, and tactful"; thinking types are told they "prefer an objective standard of truth" and are "good at analyzing." (Every type has its strengths, so everyone is affirmed.)

Most people agree with their announced type profile, which mirrors their declared preferences. They may also accept their label as a basis for being matched with work partners

**trait** a characteristic pattern of behavior or a disposition to feel and act, as assessed by self-report inventories and peer reports.

and tasks that supposedly suit their temperaments. A National Research Council report noted, however, that despite the test's popularity in business and career counseling, its initial use outran research on its value as a predictor of job performance, and "the popularity of this instrument in the absence of proven scientific worth is troublesome" (Druckman & Bjork, 1991, p. 101; see also Pittenger, 1993). Although research on the MBTI has been accumulating since those cautionary words were expressed, the test remains mostly a counseling and coaching tool, not a research instrument.

## Exploring Traits

Classifying people as one or another distinct personality type fails to capture their full individuality. We are each a unique complex of multiple traits. So how else could we describe our personalities? We might describe an apple by placing it along several trait dimensions—relatively large or small, red or green, sweet or sour. By placing people on several trait dimensions simultaneously, psychologists can describe countless individual personality variations. (Remember from Module 18 that variations on just three color dimensions—hue, saturation, and brightness—create many thousands of colors.)

What trait dimensions describe personality? If you had an upcoming blind date, what personality traits might give you an accurate sense of the person? Allport and his associate H. S. Odbert (1936) counted all the words in an unabridged dictionary with which one could describe people. There were almost 18,000! How, then, could psychologists condense the list to a manageable number of basic traits?

## Factor Analysis

One technique is *factor analysis*, a statistical procedure used to identify clusters of test items that tap basic components of intelligence (such as spatial ability or verbal skill). Imagine that people who describe themselves as outgoing also tend to say that they like excitement and practical jokes and dislike quiet reading. Such a statistically correlated cluster of behaviors reflects a basic factor, or trait—in this case, *extraversion*.

British psychologists Hans Eysenck and Sybil Eysenck [EYE-zink] believed that we can reduce many of our normal individual variations to two or three dimensions, including *extraversion–introversion* and *emotional stability–instability* (**FIGURE 58.1**). People in 35 countries around the world, from China to Uganda to Russia, have taken the *Eysenck Personality Questionnaire*. When their answers were analyzed, the extraversion and emotionality factors inevitably emerged as basic personality dimensions (Eysenck, 1990, 1992). The Eysencks believed that these factors are genetically influenced, and research supports this belief.



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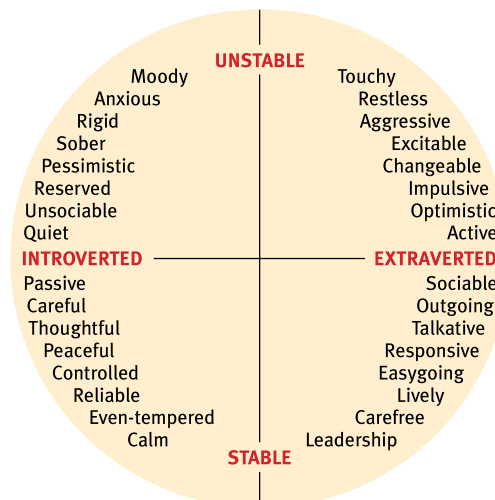
**Stephen Colbert: The extravert**  
Trait labels such as *extraversion* can describe our temperament and typical behaviors.

**Figure 58.1**  
**Two personality dimensions**

Map makers can tell us a lot by using two axes (north–south and east–west). Two primary personality factors (extraversion–introversion and stability–instability) are similarly useful as axes for describing personality variation. Varying combinations define other, more specific traits. (From Eysenck & Eysenck, 1963.) Those who are naturally introverted, such as primatologist Jane Goodall, may be particularly gifted in field studies. Successful entertainers, including recording artist Katy Perry, are often natural extraverts.



Michel Gunther/Science Source



Globe via Getty Images



**AP® Exam Tip**

You are not likely to be asked questions about the specific traits in Figure 58.1. Focus instead on the two main dimensions (extraversion–introversion and stability–instability), and use the traits to get a sense of what the main dimensions mean. For example, stable people demonstrate leadership, and they are calm, even-tempered, and carefree.

**personality inventory**

a questionnaire (often with *true-false* or *agree-disagree* items) on which people respond to items designed to gauge a wide range of feelings and behaviors; used to assess selected personality traits.

**Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI)**

the most widely researched and clinically used of all personality tests. Originally developed to identify emotional disorders (still considered its most appropriate use), this test is now used for many other screening purposes.

**empirically derived test** a test (such as the MMPI) developed by testing a pool of items and then selecting those that discriminate between groups.

**AP® Exam Tip**

This is the third time you've encountered the idea of assessing personality. As with the psychodynamic and humanistic theories, psychologists working from the trait perspective have also tried to establish their own unique ways of measuring personality—in this instance by measuring our traits. There are scientifically sound *personality inventories* in use in psychological research, but beware of the hundreds of self-assessments available online that are neither reliable nor valid.

**Biology and Personality**

Brain-activity scans of extraverts add to the growing list of traits and mental states that have been explored with brain-imaging procedures. (That list includes intelligence, impulsivity, addictive cravings, lying, sexual attraction, aggressiveness, empathy, spiritual experience, and even racial and political attitudes [Olson, 2005].) Such studies indicate that extraverts seek stimulation because their normal *brain arousal* is relatively low. For example, PET scans show that a frontal lobe area involved in behavior inhibition is less active in extraverts than in introverts (Johnson et al., 1999). Dopamine and dopamine-related neural activity tend to be higher in extraverts (Wacker et al., 2006).

Our biology influences our personality in other ways as well.

As you may recall from the twin and adoption studies in Module 14, our *genes* have much to say about the behavioral style that helps define our personality. Jerome Kagan, for example, has attributed differences in children's shyness and inhibition to their *autonomic nervous system reactivity*. Given a reactive autonomic nervous system, we respond to stress with greater anxiety and inhibition. The fearless, curious child may become the rock-climbing or fast-driving adult.

Other researchers report that personality differences among dogs (in energy, affection, reactivity, and curious intelligence) are as evident, and as consistently judged, as personality differences among humans (Gosling et al., 2003; Jones & Gosling, 2005). Monkeys, chimpanzees, orangutans, and even birds also have stable personalities (Weiss et al., 2006). Among the Great Tit (a European relative of the American chickadee), bold birds more quickly inspect new objects and explore trees (Groothuis & Carere, 2005; Verbeek et al., 1994). By selective breeding, researchers can produce bold or shy birds. Both have their place in natural history. In lean years, bold birds are more likely to find food; in abundant years, shy birds feed with less risk.



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**Assessing Traits****58-2**

What are personality inventories, and what are their strengths and weaknesses as trait-assessment tools?

If stable and enduring traits guide our actions, can we devise valid and reliable tests of them? Several trait assessment techniques exist—some more valid than others (see Thinking Critically About: How to Be a “Successful” Astrologer or Palm Reader). Some provide quick assessments of a single trait, such as extraversion, anxiety, or self-esteem. **Personality inventories**—longer questionnaires covering a wide range of feelings and behaviors—assess several traits at once.

The classic personality inventory is the **Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI)**. Although it assesses “abnormal” personality tendencies rather than normal personality traits, the MMPI illustrates a good way of developing a personality inventory. One of its creators, Starke Hathaway (1960), compared his effort with that of Alfred Binet. Binet, as you will see in Module 61, developed the first intelligence test by selecting items that identified children who would probably have trouble progressing normally in French schools. Like Binet's items, the MMPI items were **empirically derived**. From a large pool of items, Hathaway and his colleagues selected those on which particular diagnostic groups differed. They then grouped the questions into 10 clinical scales, including scales that assess depressive tendencies, masculinity–femininity, and introversion–extraversion.

Hathaway and others initially gave hundreds of true-false statements (“No one seems to understand me”; “I get all the sympathy I should”; “I like poetry”) to groups of psychologically disordered patients and to “normal” people. They retained any statement—no matter how silly it sounded—on which the patient group's answer differed from that of the normal group. “Nothing in the newspaper interests me except the comics” may seem senseless, but it just so happened that depressed people were more likely to answer *True*.

## Thinking Critically About

### How to Be a “Successful” Astrologer or Palm Reader

“A petite fortune-teller who escapes from prison is a small medium at large.” -ANONYMOUS

Can we discern people's traits from the alignment of the stars and planets at the time of their birth? From their handwriting? From lines on their palms?

Astronomers scoff at the naiveté of astrology—the constellations have shifted in the millennia since astrologers formulated their predictions (Kelly, 1997, 1998). Humorists mock it: “No offense,” writes Dave Barry, “but if you take the horoscope seriously your frontal lobes are the size of Raisinets.” Psychologists instead ask questions: Does it work? Can astrologers surpass chance when given someone's birth date and asked to identify the person from a short lineup of different personality descriptions? Can people pick out their own horoscopes from a lineup of horoscopes? Do people's astrological signs correlate with predicted traits?

The consistent answers have been *No, No, No, and No* (British Psychological Society, 1993; Carlson, 1985; Kelly, 1997; Reichardt, 2010). For example, one researcher examined census data from 20 million married people in England and Wales and found that “astrological sign has no impact on the probability of marrying—and staying married to—someone of any other sign” (Voas, 2008).

Graphologists, who make predictions from handwriting samples, have similarly been found to do no better than chance when trying to discern people's occupations from examining several pages of their handwriting (Beyerstein & Beyerstein, 1992; Dean et al., 1992). Nevertheless, graphologists—and introductory psychology students—will often perceive correlations between personality and handwriting even where there are none (King & Koehler, 2000).

If all these perceived correlations evaporate under close scrutiny, how do astrologers, palm readers, and crystal-ball gazers persuade millions of people worldwide to buy their services? Ray Hyman (1981), palm reader turned research psychologist, has revealed some of their suckering methods.

The first technique, the “stock spiel,” builds on the observation that each of us is in some ways like no one else and in other ways just like everyone. That some things are true of us all enables the “seer” to offer statements that seem impressively accurate: “I sense that you worry about things more than you let on, even to your best friends.” A number of such generally true statements can be combined into a personality description. Imagine that you take a personality test and then receive the following character sketch:



You have a strong need for other people to like and to admire you. You have a tendency to be critical of yourself. . . . You pride yourself on being an independent thinker and do not accept other opinions without satisfactory proof. You have found it unwise to be too frank in revealing yourself to others. At times you are extraverted, affable, sociable; at other times you are introverted, wary, and reserved. Some of your aspirations tend to be pretty unrealistic (Davies, 1997; Forer, 1949).

In experiments, college students have received stock assessments like this one, drawn from statements in a newsstand astrology book. When they thought the bogus, generic feedback was prepared just for them and when it was favorable, they nearly always rated the description as either “good” or “excellent” (Davies, 1997). Even skeptics, given a flattering description attributed to an astrologer, begin to think that “maybe there's something to this astrology stuff after all” (Glick et al., 1989). An astrologer, it has been said, is someone “prepared to tell you what you think of yourself” (Jones, 2000). This acceptance of stock, positive descriptions is called the *Barnum effect*, named in honor of master showman P. T. Barnum's dictum, “We've got something for everyone.”

A second technique used by seers is to “read” our clothing, physical features, gestures, and reactions. An expensive wedding ring and black dress might, for example, suggest a wealthy woman who was recently widowed.

(continued)

## Thinking Critically About *(continued)*

You, too, could read such clues, says Hyman. If people seek you out for a reading, start with some safe sympathy: “I sense you’re having some problems lately. You seem unsure what to do. I get the feeling another person is involved.” Then tell them what they want to hear. Memorize some Barnum statements from astrology and fortune-telling manuals and use them liberally. Tell people it is their responsibility to cooperate by relating your message to their specific experiences. Later they will recall that you predicted those specific details. Phrase statements as questions, and when you detect a positive response assert the statement strongly. Finally, be a good listener, and later, in different words, reveal to people what they earlier revealed to you. If you dupe them, they will come.

Better yet, beware of those who, by exploiting people with these techniques, are fortune takers rather than fortune tellers.



*“Perhaps you’d like a second opinion?”*

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(Nevertheless, people have had fun spoofing the MMPI with their own mock items: “Weeping brings tears to my eyes,” “Frantic screams make me nervous,” and “I stay in the bathtub until I look like a raisin” [Frankel et al., 1983].) Today’s MMPI-2 also has scales assessing, for instance, work attitudes, family problems, and anger.

In contrast to the subjectivity of most projective tests, personality inventories are scored objectively—so objectively that a computer can administer and score them. (The computer can also provide descriptions of people who previously responded similarly.) Objectivity does not, however, guarantee validity. For example, individuals taking the MMPI for employment purposes can give socially desirable answers to create a good impression. But in so doing they may also score high on a *lie scale* that assesses faking (as when people respond *false* to a universally true statement such as “I get angry sometimes”). The objectivity of the MMPI has contributed to its popularity and to its translation into more than 100 languages.

## The Big Five Factors

**58-3**

Which traits seem to provide the most useful information about personality variation?

Today’s trait researchers believe that simple trait factors, such as the Eysencks’ introverted–extraverted and unstable–stable dimensions, are important, but they do not tell the whole story. A slightly expanded set of factors—dubbed the *Big Five*—does a better job (Costa & McCrae, 2009). Work by Paul Costa, Robert McCrae, and others shows that where we fall on these five dimensions (conscientiousness, agreeableness, neuroticism, openness, and extraversion; see **TABLE 58.1**), reveals much of what there is to say about our personality. Around the world—across 56 nations and 29 languages in one study (Schmitt et al., 2007)—people describe others in terms roughly consistent with this list. The Big Five may not be the last word. (Some researchers report it takes only two or three factors—such as conscientiousness, agreeableness, and extraversion—to describe the basic personality dimensions [Block, 2010; De Raad et al., 2010].) But for now, at least, five is the winning number in the personality lottery (Heine & Buchtel, 2009; McCrae, 2009). The Big Five—today’s “common currency for personality psychology” (Funder, 2001)—has been the most active personality research topic since the early 1990s and is currently our best approximation of the basic trait dimensions.



**Table 58.1** The “Big Five” Personality Factors*(Memory tip: Picturing a CANOE will help you recall these.)*

Disorganized Careless Impulsive	Conscientiousness	Organized Careful Disciplined
Ruthless Suspicious Uncooperative	Agreeableness	Soft-hearted Trusting Helpful
Calm Secure Self-satisfied	Neuroticism (emotional stability vs. instability)	Anxious Insecure Self-pitying
Practical Prefers routine Conforming	Openness	Imaginative Prefers variety Independent
Retiring Sober Reserved	Extraversion	Sociable Fun-loving Affectionate

Source: Adapted from McCrae &amp; Costa (1986, 2008).

Steve Wisbauer/Getty Images

Big Five research has explored various questions:

- **How stable are these traits?** In adulthood, the Big Five traits are quite stable, with some tendencies (emotional instability, extraversion, and openness) waning a bit during early and middle adulthood, and others (agreeableness and conscientiousness) rising (McCrae, 2011; Vaidya et al., 2002). Conscientiousness increases the most during people’s twenties, as people mature and learn to manage their jobs and relationships. Agreeableness increases the most during people’s thirties and continues to increase through their sixties (Srivastava et al., 2003).
- **How heritable are they?** Heritability (the extent to which individual differences are attributable to genes) varies with the diversity of people studied, but it generally runs 50 percent or a tad more for each dimension, and genetic influences are similar in different nations (Loehlin et al., 1998; Yamagata et al., 2006). Many genes, each having small effects, combine to influence our traits (McCrae et al., 2010). Researchers have also identified brain areas associated with the various Big Five traits, such as a frontal lobe area that is sensitive to reward and is larger in extraverts (DeYoung et al., 2010).
- **Do the Big Five traits predict our actual behaviors?** Yes. If people report being outgoing, conscientious, and agreeable, “they probably are telling the truth,” reports Big Five researcher Robert McCrae (2011). Here are some examples:
  - Shy introverts are more likely than extraverts to prefer communicating by e-mail rather than face-to-face (Hertel et al., 2008).
  - Highly conscientious people earn better high school and university grades (Poropat, 2009). They also are more likely to be morning types (sometimes called “larks”); evening types (“owls”) are marginally more extraverted (Jackson & Gerard, 1996).
  - If one partner scores lower than the other on agreeableness, stability, and openness, marital and sexual satisfaction may suffer (Botwin et al., 1997; Donnellan et al., 2004).

**AP® Exam Tip**

Table 58.1 is an excellent summary of the Big Five personality factors and what they mean.

- Our traits infuse our language. In text messaging, extraversion predicts use of personal pronouns, agreeableness predicts positive-emotion words, and neuroticism (emotional instability) predicts negative-emotion words (Holtgraves, 2011).

By exploring such questions, Big Five research has sustained trait psychology and renewed appreciation for the importance of personality. Traits matter.

## Evaluating Trait Theories

58-4

Does research support the consistency of personality traits over time and across situations?

Are our personality traits stable and enduring? Or does our behavior depend on where and with whom we find ourselves? J.R.R. Tolkien created characters, like the loyal Sam Gamgee, whose personality traits were consistent across various times and places. The Italian playwright Luigi Pirandello had a different view. For him, personality was ever-changing, tailored to the particular role or situation. In one of Pirandello's plays, Lamberto Laudisi describes himself: "I am really what you take me to be; though, my dear madam, that does not prevent me from also being really what your husband, my sister, my niece, and Signora Cini take me to be—because they also are absolutely right!" To which Signora Sirelli responds, "In other words you are a different person for each of us."

"There is as much difference between us and ourselves, as between us and others."—MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE, *ESSAYS*, 1588

### FYI

Roughly speaking, the temporary, external influences on behavior are the focus of social psychology, and the enduring, inner influences are the focus of personality psychology. In actuality, behavior always depends on the interaction of persons with situations.

## The Person-Situation Controversy

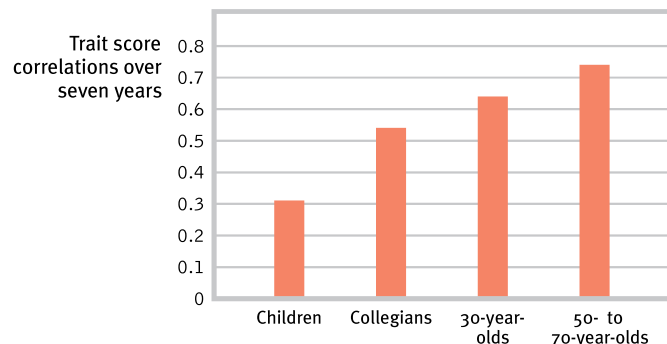
Who, then, typifies human personality, Tolkien's consistent Sam Gamgee or Pirandello's inconsistent Laudisi? Both. Our behavior is influenced by the interaction of our inner disposition with our environment. Still, the question lingers: Which is more important? Are we *more* as Tolkien or as Pirandello imagined us to be?

When we explore this *person-situation controversy*, we look for genuine personality traits that persist over time *and* across situations. Are some people dependably conscientious and others unreliable, some cheerful and others dour, some friendly and outgoing and others shy? If we are to consider friendliness a trait, friendly people must act friendly at different times and places. Do they?

In earlier chapters, we considered research that has followed lives through time. We noted that some scholars (especially those who study infants) are impressed with personality change; others are struck by personality stability during adulthood. As **FIGURE 58.2** illustrates, data from 152 long-term studies reveal that personality trait scores are positively correlated with scores obtained seven years later, and that as people grow older their personality stabilizes. Interests may change—the avid collector of tropical fish may become an avid gardener. Careers may change—the determined salesperson may become a determined social worker. Relationships may change—the hostile spouse may start over with a

**Figure 58.2**

**Personality stability** With age, personality traits become more stable, as reflected in the stronger correlation of trait scores with follow-up scores seven years later. (Data from Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000.)



new partner. But most people recognize their traits as their own, note Robert McCrae and Paul Costa (1994), “and it is well that they do. A person’s recognition of the inevitability of his or her one and only personality is . . . the culminating wisdom of a lifetime.”

So most people—including most psychologists—would probably side with Tolkien’s assumption of stability of personality traits. Moreover, our traits are socially significant. They influence our health, our thinking, and our job performance (Deary & Matthews, 1993; Hogan, 1998). Studies that follow lives through time show that personality traits rival socioeconomic status and cognitive ability as predictors of mortality, divorce, and occupational attainment (Roberts et al., 2007).

Although our personality *traits* may be both stable and potent, the consistency of our specific *behaviors* from one situation to the next is another matter. As Walter Mischel (1968, 2009) has pointed out, people do not act with predictable consistency. Mischel’s studies of college students’ conscientiousness revealed but a modest relationship between a student’s being conscientious on one occasion (say, showing up for class on time) and being similarly conscientious on another occasion (say, turning in assignments on time). Pirandello would not have been surprised. If you’ve noticed how outgoing you are in some situations and how reserved you are in others, perhaps you’re not surprised either (though for certain traits, Mischel reports, you may accurately assess yourself as more consistent).

This inconsistency in behaviors also makes personality test scores weak predictors of behaviors. People’s scores on an extraversion test, for example, do not neatly predict how sociable they actually will be on any given occasion. If we remember such results, says Mischel, we will be more cautious about labeling and pigeonholing individuals. Years in advance, science can tell us the phase of the Moon for any given date. A day in advance, meteorologists can often predict the weather. But we are much further from being able to predict how *you* will feel and act tomorrow.

However, people’s *average* outgoingness, happiness, or carelessness over many situations is predictable (Epstein, 1983a,b). When rating someone’s shyness or agreeableness, this consistency enables people who know someone well to agree on their ratings (Kenrick & Funder, 1988). By collecting snippets of people’s daily experience via body-worn recording devices, Matthias Mehl and his colleagues (2006) confirmed that extraverts really do talk more. (I have repeatedly vowed to cut back on my jabbering and joking during my noontime pickup basketball games with friends. Alas, moments later, the irrepressible chatterbox inevitably reoccupies my body.) As our best friends can verify, we do have genetically influenced personality traits. And those traits even lurk in our

- *music preferences.* Classical, jazz, blues, and folk music lovers tend to be open to experience and verbally intelligent; country, pop, and religious music lovers tend to be cheerful, outgoing, and conscientious (Rentfrow & Gosling, 2003, 2006). On first meeting, students often disclose their music preferences to one another; in doing so, they are swapping information about their personalities.
- *bedrooms and offices.* Our personal spaces display our identity and leave a behavioral residue (in our scattered laundry or neat desktop). And that helps explain why just a few minutes’ inspection of our living and working spaces can enable someone to assess with reasonable accuracy our conscientiousness, our openness to new experiences, and even our emotional stability (Gosling et al., 2002, 2008).



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“Mr. Coughlin over there was the founder of one of the first motorcycle gangs.”



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“I’m going to France—I’m a different person in France.”



ICP-UK/Alamy





**Room with a cue** Even at “zero acquaintance,” people can discern something of others’ personality from glimpsing their website, bedroom, or office.

- *personal websites.* Is a personal website or an online profile also a canvas for self-expression? Or is it an opportunity for people to present themselves in false or misleading ways? It’s more the former (Back et al., 2010; Gosling et al., 2007; Marcus et al., 2006). Visitors to personal websites quickly gain important clues to the creator’s extraversion, conscientiousness, and openness to experience. Even mere pictures of people, and their associated clothes, expressions, and postures, can give clues to personality (Naumann et al., 2009).
- *electronic communication.* If you have ever felt you could detect others’ personality from their writing voice, you are right!! (What a cool, exciting finding!!!) People’s ratings of others’ personalities based solely on their e-mails or blogs correlate with actual personality scores on measures such as extraversion and neuroticism (Gill et al., 2006; Oberlander & Gill, 2006; Yarkoni, 2010). Extraverts, for example, use more adjectives.

In unfamiliar, formal situations—perhaps as a guest in the home of a person from another culture—our traits remain hidden as we carefully attend to social cues. In familiar, informal situations—just hanging out with friends—we feel less constrained, allowing our traits to emerge (Buss, 1989). In these informal situations, our expressive styles—our animation, manner of speaking, and gestures—are impressively consistent. That’s why those very thin slices of someone’s behavior—even just three 2-second clips of a teacher—can be revealing (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1992, 1993).

Some people are naturally expressive (and therefore talented at pantomime and charades); others are less expressive (and therefore better poker players). To evaluate people’s voluntary control over their expressiveness, researchers asked people to *act* as expressive or inhibited as possible while stating opinions (DePaulo et al., 1992). The remarkable findings: Inexpressive people, even when feigning expressiveness, were less expressive than expressive people acting naturally. Similarly, expressive people, even when trying to seem inhibited, were less inhibited than inexpressive people acting naturally. It’s hard to be someone you’re not, or not to be who you are.

To sum up, we can say that at any moment the immediate situation powerfully influences a person’s behavior. Social psychologists have assumed, albeit without much evidence, that this is especially so when a “strong situation” makes clear demands (Cooper & Withey, 2009). We can better predict drivers’ behavior at traffic lights from knowing the color of the lights than from knowing the drivers’ personalities. Thus, professors may perceive certain students as subdued (based on their classroom behavior), but friends may perceive them as pretty wild (based on their party behavior). Averaging our behavior across many occasions does, however, reveal distinct personality traits. Traits exist. We differ. And our differences matter.

## Before You Move On

### ▶ ASK YOURSELF

Where would you place yourself on the five personality dimensions—conscientiousness, agreeableness, neuroticism (emotional stability versus instability), openness, and extraversion? Where might your family and friends place you?

### ▶ TEST YOURSELF

What is the person-situation controversy?

*Answers to the Test Yourself questions can be found in Appendix E at the end of the book.*

## Module 58 Review

### 58-1 How do psychologists use traits to describe personality?

- *Trait* theorists see personality as a stable and enduring pattern of behavior. They describe our differences rather than trying to explain them.
- Using factor analysis, they identify clusters of behavior tendencies that occur together. Genetic predispositions influence many traits.

### 58-2 What are personality inventories, and what are their strengths and weaknesses as trait-assessment tools?

- *Personality inventories* (such as the *MMPI*) are questionnaires on which people respond to items designed to gauge a wide range of feelings and behaviors.
- Test items are *empirically derived*, and the tests are objectively scored. But people can fake their answers to create a good impression, and the ease of computerized testing may lead to misuse of the tests.

### 58-3 Which traits seem to provide the most useful information about personality variation?

- The Big Five personality factors—conscientiousness, agreeableness, neuroticism, openness, and extraversion (CANOE)—currently offer the clearest picture of personality. These factors are stable and appear to be found in all cultures.

### 58-4 Does research support the consistency of personality traits over time and across situations?

- A person's average traits persist over time and are predictable over many different situations. But traits cannot predict behavior in any one particular situation.

## Multiple-Choice Questions

1. Which of the following is the best term or phrase for a characteristic pattern of behavior or a disposition to feel and act?
  - a. Myers-Briggs Indicator
  - b. Factor analysis
  - c. Introversion
  - d. Extroversion
  - e. Trait
2. Which of the following is a "Big Five" personality factor?
  - a. Seriousness
  - b. Neuroticism
  - c. Dutifulness
  - d. Dominance
  - e. Abstractedness
3. Which of the following is best described along a continuum ranging from ruthless and suspicious to helpful and trusting?
  - a. Conscientiousness
  - b. Agreeableness
  - c. Openness
  - d. Extraversion
  - e. Perfectionism
4. Which of the following is true based on "Big Five" personality traits research?
  - a. Highly conscientious people are likely to be evening people or "owls."
  - b. Highly conscientious people get poor grades.
  - c. Married partners scoring the same on agreeableness are more likely to experience marital dissatisfaction.
  - d. Shy introverts are more likely to prefer communicating through e-mail instead of in person.
  - e. Neuroticism predicts the use of positive-emotion words in text messages.

## Practice FRQs

1. Explain one weakness and one strength of the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI).

### Answer

**1 point:** One point for any strength (for example, the MMPI is empirically derived, assesses several traits at once, or is easily scored).

**1 point:** One point for any weakness (for example, the MMPI test-taker might not answer honestly, or validity is not guaranteed).

2. Explain Hans and Sybil Eysenck's personality dimensions.

**(4 points)**



# Module 59

## Social-Cognitive Theories and Exploring the Self

### Module Learning Objectives

- 59-1** Identify the psychologist who first proposed the social-cognitive perspective, and describe how social-cognitive theorists view personality development.
- 59-2** Describe how social-cognitive researchers explore behavior, and state the criticism they have faced.
- 59-3** Explain why psychology has generated so much research on the self, and discuss the importance of self-esteem to psychology and to human well-being.
- 59-4** Discuss some evidence for self-serving bias, and contrast defensive and secure self-esteem.
- 59-5** Discuss how individualist and collectivist cultures influence people.



### Social-Cognitive Theories

- 59-1** Who first proposed the social-cognitive perspective, and how do social-cognitive theorists view personality development?

Today's psychological science views individuals as biopsychosocial organisms. The **social-cognitive perspective** on personality proposed by Albert Bandura (1986, 2006, 2008) emphasizes the interaction of our traits with our situations. Much as nature and nurture always work together, so do individuals and their situations.

Those who take the **behavioral approach** to personality development emphasize the effects of learning. We are conditioned to repeat certain behaviors, and we learn by observing and imitating others. For example, a child with a very controlling parent may learn to follow orders rather than think independently, and may exhibit a more timid personality.

Social-cognitive theorists do consider the behavioral perspective, including others' influence. (That's the "social" part.) However, they also emphasize the importance of mental processes: What we *think* about our situations affects our behavior. (That's the "cognitive" part.) Instead of focusing solely on how our environment *controls* us, as behaviorists do, social-cognitive theorists focus on how we and our environment *interact*: How do we interpret and respond to external events? How do our schemas, our memories, and our expectations influence our behavior patterns?

#### **social-cognitive perspective**

views behavior as influenced by the interaction between people's traits (including their thinking) and their social context.

#### **behavioral approach**

in personality theory, this perspective focuses on the effects of learning on our personality development.

**reciprocal determinism**

the interacting influences of behavior, internal cognition, and environment.

**Reciprocal Influences**

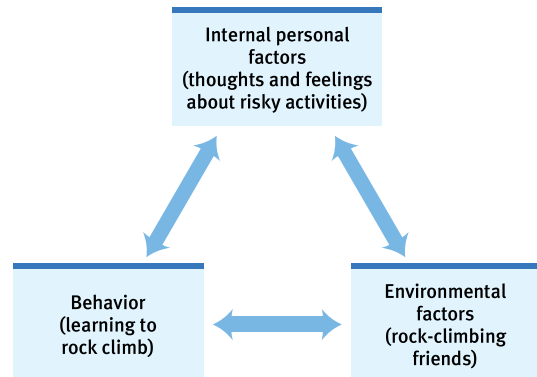
Bandura (1986, 2006) views the person-environment interaction as **reciprocal determinism**. “Behavior, internal personal factors, and environmental influences,” he said, “all operate as interlocking determinants of each other” (**FIGURE 59.1**). For example, children’s TV-viewing habits (past behavior) influence their viewing preferences (internal factor), which influence how television (environmental factor) affects their current behavior. The influences are mutual.

**Figure 59.1****Reciprocal determinism**

The social-cognitive perspective proposes that our personalities are shaped by the interaction of our personal traits (including our thoughts and feelings), our environment, and our behaviors.



Courtesy of Joslyn Bugh

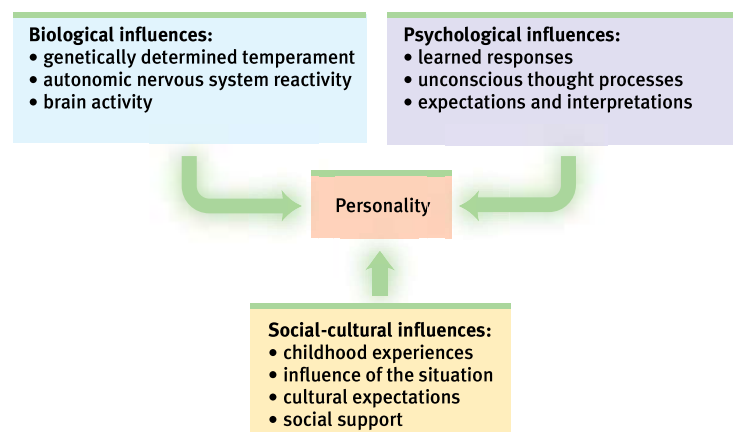


Consider three specific ways in which individuals and environments interact:

1. **Different people choose different environments.** The school you attend, the reading you do, the TV programs you watch, the music you listen to, the friends you associate with—all are part of an environment you participated in choosing, based partly on your dispositions (Funder, 2009; Ickes et al., 1997). You choose your environment and it then shapes you.
2. **Our personalities shape how we interpret and react to events.** Anxious people, for example, are attuned to potentially threatening events (Eysenck et al., 1987). Thus, they perceive the world as threatening, and they react accordingly.
3. **Our personalities help create situations to which we react.** Many experiments reveal that how we view and treat people influences how they in turn treat us. If we expect someone to be angry with us, we may give the person a cold shoulder, touching off the very anger we expect. If we have an easygoing, positive disposition, we will likely enjoy close, supportive friendships (Donnellan et al., 2005; Kendler, 1997).

**Figure 59.2****The biopsychosocial approach to the study of personality**

As with other psychological phenomena, personality is fruitfully studied at multiple levels.



In such ways, we are both the products and the architects of our environments.

If all this has a familiar ring, it may be because it parallels and reinforces a pervasive theme in psychology and in this book: *Behavior emerges from the interplay of external and internal influences*. Boiling water turns an egg hard and a potato soft. A threatening environment turns one person into a hero, another into a scoundrel. Extraverts enjoy greater well-being in an extraverted culture than an introverted one (Fulmer et al., 2010). *At every moment*, our behavior is influenced by our biology, our social and cultural experiences, and our cognition and dispositions (**FIGURE 59.2**).

## Optimism Versus Pessimism

Recall from Module 29 that we learn to cope with life's challenges in various ways. In studying how we interact with our environment, social-cognitive psychologists emphasize our sense of *personal control*—whether we learn to see ourselves as controlling, or as controlled by, our environment. One measure of how helpless or effective you feel is where you stand on optimism-pessimism. How do you characteristically explain negative and positive events? Perhaps you have known students whose *attributional style* is pessimistic—who attribute poor performance to their lack of ability (“I can’t do this”) or to situations enduringly beyond their control (“There is nothing I can do about it”). Such students are more likely to continue getting low grades than are students who adopt the more hopeful attitude that effort, good study habits, and self-discipline can make a difference (Noel et al., 1987; Peterson & Barrett, 1987). Mere fantasies do not fuel motivation and success. Realistic positive expectations do (Oettingen & Mayer, 2002).

Attributional style also matters when dating couples wrestle with conflicts. Optimists and their partners see each other as engaging constructively, and they then tend to feel more supported and satisfied with the resolution and with their relationship (Srivastava et al., 2006). Expect good things from others, and often you will get what you expect. Such studies helped point Martin Seligman toward proposing a more positive psychology (see Close-up: Toward a More Positive Psychology on the next page).

### EXCESSIVE OPTIMISM

Positive thinking in the face of adversity can pay dividends, but so, too, can a dash of realism (Schneider, 2001). Realistic anxiety over possible future failures can fuel energetic efforts to avoid the dreaded fate (Goodhart, 1986; Norem, 2001; Showers, 1992). Concerned about failing an upcoming test, students may study thoroughly and outperform their equally able but more confident peers. Asian-American students express somewhat greater pessimism than their European-American counterparts, which Edward Chang (2001) suspects helps explain their often impressive academic achievements. Success requires enough optimism to provide hope and enough pessimism to prevent complacency. We want our airline pilots to be mindful of worst-possible outcomes.

Excessive optimism can blind us to real risks. Neil Weinstein (1980, 1982, 1996) has shown how our natural positive-thinking bias can promote “an unrealistic optimism about future life events.” Most late adolescents see themselves as much less vulnerable than their peers to the HIV virus that causes AIDS (Abrams, 1991). Most college students perceive themselves as less likely than their average classmate to develop drinking problems, drop out of school, have a heart attack by age 40, or go deeply into debt on their high-interest credit cards (Yang et al., 2006). If overconfident of our ability to control an impulse such as the urge to smoke, we are more likely to expose ourselves to temptations—and to fail (Nordgren et al., 2009). Those who optimistically deny the power and effects of smoking or venture into ill-fated relationships remind us that blind optimism can be self-defeating.

People also display illusory optimism about their groups. Throughout a National Football League season, fans of all teams correctly guessed that other teams would win about 50 percent of the games. But they incorrectly guessed, on average (across teams and weeks), that their own team stood about a 2 in 3 chance of winning (Massey et al., 2011). This optimistic and illogical bias persisted despite their team’s experience and monetary incentives for accuracy.

Our natural positive-thinking bias does seem to vanish, however, when we are bracing ourselves for feedback, such as test results (Carroll et al., 2006). (Have you ever noticed that, as a big game nears its end, the outcome seems more in doubt when your team is ahead than when it is behind?) Positive illusions also vanish after a traumatic personal experience—as they did for victims of a catastrophic California earthquake, who had to give up their illusions of being less vulnerable than others to earthquakes (Helweg-Larsen, 1999).

**Positive expectations often motivate eventual success.**



*“We just haven’t been flapping them hard enough.”*

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## Close-up

### Toward a More Positive Psychology

During its first century, psychology understandably focused much of its attention on understanding and alleviating negative states. Psychologists have studied abuse and anxiety, depression and disease, prejudice and poverty. Since 1887, articles on selected negative emotions have outnumbered those on positive emotions by 17 to 1.

In ages past, notes American Psychological Association past-president Martin Seligman (2002), times of relative peace and prosperity have enabled cultures to turn their attention from repairing weakness and damage to promoting “the highest qualities of life.” Prosperous fifth-century Athens nurtured philosophy and democracy. Flourishing fifteenth-century Florence nurtured great art. Victorian England, flush with the bounty of the British Empire, nurtured honor, discipline, and duty. In this millennium, Seligman believes, thriving Western cultures have a parallel opportunity to create, as a “humane, scientific monument,” a more **positive psychology**—a psychology concerned not only with weakness and damage but also with strength and virtue. Thanks to his own leadership, the new positive psychology movement has gained strength, with supporters in 77 countries from Croatia to China (IPPA, 2009, 2010; Seligman, 2004, 2011).

Positive psychology shares with humanistic psychology an interest in advancing human fulfillment, but its methodology is scientific. Positive psychology science is exploring

- *positive well-being*—which assesses exercises and interventions aimed at increasing happiness (Schueller, 2010; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009),
- *positive health*—which studies how positive emotions enhance and sustain physical well-being (Seligman, 2008; Seligman et al., 2011),
- *positive neuroscience*—which explores the biological foundations of positive emotions, resilience, and social behavior ([www.posneuroscience.org](http://www.posneuroscience.org)), and
- *positive education*—which evaluates educational efforts to increase students’ engagement, resilience, character strengths, optimism, and sense of meaning (Seligman et al., 2009).

“Positive psychology,” say Seligman and colleagues (2005), “is an umbrella term for the study of positive emotions, positive character traits, and enabling institutions.” Taken together, satisfaction with the past, happiness with the present, and optimism about the future define the movement’s first pillar: *positive emotions*. Happiness, Seligman argues, is a by-product of a pleasant, engaged, and meaningful life.



Courtesy of Martin E. P. Seligman

**Martin E. P. Seligman** “The main purpose of a positive psychology is to measure, understand, and then build the human strengths and the civic virtues.”

Positive psychology is about building not just a pleasant life, says Seligman, but also a good life that engages one’s skills, and a meaningful life that points beyond oneself. Thus, the second pillar, *positive character*, focuses on exploring and enhancing creativity, courage, compassion, integrity, self-control, leadership, wisdom, and spirituality.

The third pillar, *positive groups, communities, and cultures*, seeks to foster a positive social ecology. This includes healthy families, communal neighborhoods, effective schools, socially responsible media, and civil dialogue.

Will psychology have a more positive mission in this century? Without slighting the need to repair damage and cure disease, positive psychology’s proponents hope so. With *American Psychologist* and *British Psychologist* special issues devoted to positive psychology; with many new books; with networked scientists working in worldwide research groups; and with prizes, research awards, summer institutes, and a graduate program promoting positive psychology scholarship, these psychologists have reason to be positive.

**positive psychology** the scientific study of optimal human functioning; aims to discover and promote strengths and virtues that enable individuals and communities to thrive.

## BLINDNESS TO ONE'S OWN INCOMPETENCE

Ironically, people often are most overconfident when most incompetent. That, say some researchers, is because it often takes competence to recognize competence (Kruger & Dunning, 1999). They found that most students scoring at the low end of grammar and logic tests believed they had scored in the top half. If you do not know what good grammar is, you may be unaware that your grammar is poor. This “ignorance of one’s own incompetence” phenomenon has a parallel, as I can confirm, in hard-of-hearing people’s difficulty recognizing their own hearing loss. We’re not so much “in denial” as we are simply unaware of what we don’t hear. If I fail to hear my friend calling my name, the friend notices my inattention. But for me it’s a nonevent. I hear what I hear—which, to me, seems pretty normal.

The difficulty in recognizing one’s own incompetence helps explain why so many low-scoring students are dumbfounded after doing badly on a test. If you don’t know all the Scrabble word possibilities you’ve overlooked, you may feel pretty smart—until someone points them out. As experiments that re-create this phenomenon have demonstrated, our ignorance of what we don’t know helps sustain our confidence in our own abilities (Caputo & Dunning, 2005). Once part of our self-concept, our self-assessments also influence how we perceive our performance. Thinking we’re good at something drives how we perceive ourselves doing (Cricher & Dunning, 2009).

“The living-room [Scrabble] player is lucky. . . . He has no idea how miserably he fails with almost every turn, how many possible words or optimal plays slip by unnoticed.” —STEFAN FATSIS, *WORD FREAK*, 2001

## DOONESBURY



To judge one’s competence and predict one’s future performance, it pays to invite others’ assessments (Dunning, 2006). Based on studies in which both individuals and their acquaintances predict their future, we can hazard some advice: If you’re an AP® psychology student preparing for the exam, and you want to predict how well you will do, don’t rate yourself—ask your teacher for a candid evaluation. If you’re a Naval officer and need to assess your leadership ability—don’t rate yourself, ask your fellow officers. And if you’re in love and want to predict whether it will last, don’t listen to your heart—ask your friends.

## Assessing Behavior in Situations

**59-2** How do social-cognitive researchers explore behavior, and what criticism have they faced?

Social-cognitive psychologists explore how people interact with situations. To predict behavior, they often observe behavior in realistic situations.

### Assessing behavior in situations

Reality TV shows, such as Donald Trump's *The Apprentice*, may take "show me" job interviews to the extreme, but they do illustrate a valid point. Seeing how a potential employee behaves in a job-relevant situation helps predict job performance.



AP Photo/Jennifer Szymaszek

One ambitious example was the U.S. Army's World War II strategy for assessing candidates for spy missions. Rather than using paper-and-pencil tests, Army psychologists subjected the candidates to simulated undercover conditions. They tested their ability to handle stress, solve problems, maintain leadership, and withstand intense interrogation without blowing their cover. Although time-consuming and expensive, this assessment of behavior in a realistic situation helped predict later success on actual spy missions (OSS Assessment Staff, 1948). Modern studies indicate that assessment

center exercises are more revealing of visible dimensions, such as communication ability, than others, such as inner achievement drive (Bowler & Woehr, 2006).

Military and educational organizations and many Fortune 500 companies are adopting assessment center strategies (Bray et al., 1991, 1997; Eurich et al., 2009). AT&T has observed prospective managers doing simulated managerial work. Student teachers are observed and evaluated several times during the term they spend in your school. Many colleges assess students' potential via internships and student teaching and assess potential faculty members' teaching abilities by observing them teach. Armies assess their soldiers by observing them during military exercises. Most American cities with populations of 50,000 or more have used assessment centers in evaluating police officers and firefighters (Lowry, 1997).

These procedures exploit the principle that the best means of predicting future behavior is neither a personality test nor an interviewer's intuition. Rather, it is *the person's past behavior patterns in similar situations* (Mischel, 1981; Ouellette & Wood, 1998; Schmidt & Hunter, 1998). As long as the situation and the person remain much the same, the best predictor of future job performance is past job performance; the best predictor of future grades is past grades; the best predictor of future aggressiveness is past aggressiveness; the best predictor of drug use in young adulthood is drug use in high school. If you can't check the person's past behavior, the next-best thing is to create an assessment situation that simulates the task so you can see how the person handles it (Lievens et al., 2009; Meriac et al., 2008).

### FYI

A *New York Times* analysis of 100 rampage murders over the last half-century revealed that 55 of the killers had regularly exploded in anger and 63 had threatened violence (Goodstein & Glaberson, 2000). Most didn't, out of the blue, "just snap."

### AP® Exam Tip

Tables 59.1 and 59.2 summarize a whole unit's worth of information. Study them well to be clear on the distinctions separating the major approaches to personality.

## Evaluating Social-Cognitive Theories

Social-cognitive theories of personality sensitize researchers to how situations affect, and are affected by, individuals. More than other personality theories, they build from psychological research on learning and cognition. (See **TABLE 59.1** for a comparison of personality theories.)

Critics charge that social-cognitive theories focus so much on the situation that they fail to appreciate the person's inner traits. Where is the person in this view of personality, ask the dissenters, and where are human emotions? True, the situation does guide our behavior. But, say the critics, in many instances our unconscious motives, our emotions, and our pervasive traits shine through. Personality traits have been shown to predict behavior at work, love, and play. Our biologically influenced traits really do matter. Consider Percy Ray Pridgen and Charles Gill. Each faced the same situation: They had jointly won a \$90 million lottery jackpot (Harriston, 1993). When Pridgen learned of the winning numbers, he began trembling uncontrollably, huddled with a friend behind a bathroom door while confirming the win, then sobbed. When Gill heard the news, he told his wife and then went to sleep.

\* \* \*

As we have seen, researchers investigate personality using various methods that serve differing purposes. For a synopsis and comparison of these methods, see **TABLE 59.2**.



**Table 59.1** Comparing the Major Personality Theories

Personality Theory	Key Proponents	Assumptions	View of Personality
<i>Psychoanalytic</i>	Freud	Emotional disorders spring from unconscious dynamics, such as unresolved sexual and other childhood conflicts, and fixation at various developmental stages. Defense mechanisms fend off anxiety.	Personality consists of pleasure-seeking impulses (the id), a reality-oriented executive (the ego), and an internalized set of ideals (the superego).
<i>Psychodynamic</i>	Adler, Horney, Jung	The unconscious and conscious minds interact. Childhood experiences and defense mechanisms are important.	The dynamic interplay of conscious and unconscious motives and conflicts shape our personality.
<i>Humanistic</i>	Rogers, Maslow	Rather than examining the struggles of sick people, it's better to focus on the ways people strive for self-realization.	If our basic human needs are met, people will strive toward self-actualization. In a climate of unconditional positive regard, we can develop self-awareness and a more realistic and positive self-concept.
<i>Trait</i>	Allport, Eysenck, McCrae, Costa	We have certain stable and enduring characteristics, influenced by genetic predispositions.	Scientific study of traits has isolated important dimensions of personality, such as the Big Five traits (conscientiousness, agreeableness, neuroticism, openness, and extraversion).
<i>Social-Cognitive</i>	Bandura	Our traits and the social context interact to produce our behaviors.	Conditioning and observational learning interact with cognition to create behavior patterns.

**Table 59.2** Comparing Research Methods to Investigate Personality

Research Method	Description	Perspectives Incorporating This Method	Benefits	Weaknesses
<i>Case study</i>	In-depth study of one individual.	Psychoanalytic, humanistic	Less expensive than other methods.	May not generalize to the larger population.
<i>Survey</i>	Systematic questioning of a random sample of the population.	Trait, social-cognitive, positive psychology	Results tend to be reliable and can be generalized to the larger population.	May be expensive; correlational findings.
<i>Projective tests</i> (e.g., TAT and Rorschach)	Ambiguous stimuli designed to trigger projection of inner dynamics.	Psychodynamic	Designed to get beneath the conscious surface of a person's self-understanding; may be a good ice-breaker.	Results have weak validity and reliability.
<i>Personality inventories</i> , such as the MMPI (to determine scores on Big Five personality factors)	Objectively scored groups of questions designed to identify personality dispositions.	Trait	Generally reliable and empirically validated.	Explore limited number of traits.
<i>Observation</i>	Studying how individuals react in different situations.	Social-cognitive	Allows researchers to study the effects of environmental factors on the way an individual's personality is expressed.	Results may not apply to the larger population.
<i>Experimentation</i>	Manipulate variables, with random assignment to conditions.	Social-cognitive	Discerns cause and effect.	Some variables cannot feasibly or ethically be manipulated.



## Before You Move On

### ► ASK YOURSELF

Are you a pessimist? Do you tend to have low expectations and to attribute bad events to your inability or to circumstances beyond your control? Or are you an optimist, perhaps even being excessively optimistic at times? How has either tendency influenced your choices thus far?

### ► TEST YOURSELF

What do social-cognitive psychologists consider the best way to predict a person's future behavior?

*Answers to the Test Yourself questions can be found in Appendix E at the end of the book.*

**self** in contemporary psychology, assumed to be the center of personality, the organizer of our thoughts, feelings, and actions.

**spotlight effect** overestimating others' noticing and evaluating our appearance, performance, and blunders (as if we presume a spotlight shines on us).

## Exploring the Self

59-3

Why has psychology generated so much research on the self? How important is self-esteem to psychology and to human well-being?

Psychology's concern with people's sense of self dates back at least to William James, who devoted more than 100 pages of his 1890 *Principles of Psychology* to the topic. By 1943, Gordon Allport lamented that the self had become "lost to view." Although humanistic psychology's later emphasis on the self did not instigate much scientific research, it did help renew the concept of self and keep it alive. Now, more than a century after James, the self is one of Western psychology's most vigorously researched topics. Every year, new studies galore appear on self-esteem, self-disclosure, self-awareness, self-schemas, self-monitoring, and so forth. Even neuroscientists have searched for self, by identifying a central frontal lobe region that activates when people respond to self-reflective questions about their traits and dispositions (Damasio, 2010; Mitchell, 2009). Underlying this research is an assumption that the **self**, as organizer of our thoughts, feelings, and actions, is the center of personality.

One example of thinking about self is the concept of possible selves put forth by Hazel Markus and her colleagues (Cross & Markus, 1991; Markus & Nurius, 1986). Your possible selves include your visions of the self you dream of becoming—the rich self, the successful self, the loved and admired self. They also include the self you fear becoming—the unemployed self, the lonely self, the academically failed self. Such possible selves motivate us by laying out specific goals and calling forth the energy to work toward them. University of Michigan students in a combined undergraduate/medical school program earn higher grades if they undergo the program with a clear vision of themselves as successful doctors. Dreams do often give birth to achievements.

Our self-focused perspective may motivate us, but it can also lead us to presume too readily that others are noticing and evaluating us. Thomas Gilovich (1996) demonstrated this **spotlight effect** by having individual Cornell University students don Barry Manilow T-shirts before entering a room with other students. Feeling self-conscious (even in the 1990s, singer Barry Manilow was not cool), the T-shirt wearers guessed that nearly half their peers would take note of the shirt as they walked in. In reality, only 23 percent did. This absence of attention applies not only to our dorky clothes and bad hair but also to our nervousness, irritation, or attraction: Fewer

**Possible selves** By giving them a chance to try out many possible selves, pretend games offer children important opportunities to develop emotionally, socially, and cognitively. This young girl may or may not grow up to be a physician, but playing adult roles will certainly bear fruit in terms of an expanded vision of what she might become.

"The first step to better times is to imagine them." -CHINESE FORTUNE COOKIE



*Girl: Trinity Mirror/Mirrorpix/Alamy; Manilow image: Timothy Large/Shutterstock*

people notice than we presume (Gilovich & Savitsky, 1999). Others are also less aware than we suppose of the variability—the ups and downs—of our appearance and performance (Gilovich et al., 2002). Even after a blunder (setting off a library alarm, showing up in the wrong clothes), we stick out like a sore thumb less than we imagine (Savitsky et al., 2001). Knowing about the spotlight effect can be empowering. Help public speakers to understand that their natural nervousness is not so apparent to their audience and their speaking performance improves (Savitsky & Gilovich, 2003).

## The Benefits of Self-Esteem

How we feel about ourselves is also important. High **self-esteem**—a feeling of self-worth—pays dividends. So does **self-efficacy**, our sense of competence on a task. People who feel good about themselves (who strongly agree with self-affirming questionnaire statements such as, “I am fun to be with”) have fewer sleepless nights. They succumb less easily to pressures to conform. They are more persistent at difficult tasks; they are less shy, anxious, and lonely. And they are just plain happier (Greenberg, 2008; Orth et al., 2008, 2009).

If feeling bad, they think they deserve better and thus make more effort to repair their mood (Wood et al., 2009).

But is high self-esteem the horse or the cart? Is it really “the armor that protects kids” from life’s problems (McKay, 2000)? Some psychologists have their doubts (Baumeister, 2006; Dawes, 1994; Leary, 1999; Seligman, 1994, 2002). Children’s academic self-efficacy—their confidence that they can do well in a subject—predicts school achievement. But general self-image does not (Marsh & Craven, 2006; Swann et al., 2007; Trautwein et al., 2006). Maybe self-esteem simply reflects reality. Maybe feeling good *follows* doing well. Maybe it’s a side effect of meeting challenges and surmounting difficulties. Maybe self-esteem is a gauge that reads out the state of our relationships with others. If so, isn’t pushing the gauge artificially higher (“You are special”) akin to forcing a car’s low fuel gauge to display “full”? And if problems and failures cause low self-esteem, won’t the best boost therefore come not from our repeatedly telling children how wonderful they are but from their own effective coping and hard-won achievements?

However, experiments do reveal an *effect* of low self-esteem. Temporarily deflate people’s self-image (say, by telling them they did poorly on an aptitude test or by disparaging their personality) and they will be more likely to disparage others or to express heightened racial prejudice (Ybarra, 1999). Those who are negative about themselves also tend to be oversensitive and judgmental (Baumgardner et al., 1989; Pelham, 1993). In experiments, people made to feel insecure often become excessively critical, as if to impress others with their own brilliance (Amabile, 1983). Such findings are consistent with Maslow’s and Rogers’ presumptions that a healthy self-image pays dividends. Accept yourself and you’ll find it easier to accept others. Disparage yourself and you will be prone to the floccinaucinihilipilification<sup>1</sup> of others. Said more simply, some “love their neighbors as themselves”; others loathe their neighbors as themselves. People who are down on themselves tend to be down on other things and people.



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### AP® Exam Tip

It's important to note the difference between *self-esteem* and *self-efficacy*. Although your feeling of self-worth might be related to your beliefs about how competent you are, they are not the same thing.

“When kids increase in self-control, their grades go up later. But when kids increase their self-esteem, there is no effect on their grades.” -ANGELA DUCKWORTH, IN CHARACTER INTERVIEW, 2009

**self-esteem** one’s feelings of high or low self-worth.

**self-efficacy** one’s sense of competence and effectiveness.

<sup>1</sup> I couldn’t resist throwing that in. But don’t worry, you won’t be tested on floccinaucinihilipilification, which is the act of estimating something as worthless (and was the longest nontechnical word in the first edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*).

## Self-Serving Bias

**59-4**

What evidence reveals self-serving bias, and how do defensive and secure self-esteem differ?

**self-serving bias** a readiness to perceive oneself favorably.

Carl Rogers (1958) once objected to the religious doctrine that humanity's problems arise from excessive self-love, or pride. He noted that most people he had known "despise themselves, regard themselves as worthless and unlovable." Mark Twain had a similar idea: "No man, deep down in the privacy of his heart, has any considerable respect for himself."

Actually, most of us have a good reputation with ourselves. In studies of self-esteem, even those who score relatively low respond in the midrange of possible scores. (A low-self-esteem person responds to statements such as "I have good ideas" with qualifying adjectives such as *somewhat* or *sometimes*.) Moreover, one of psychology's most provocative and firmly established recent conclusions concerns our potent **self-serving bias**—our readiness to perceive ourselves favorably (Mezulis et al., 2004; Myers, 2008). Consider:

**People accept more responsibility for good deeds than for bad, and for successes than for failures.** Athletes often privately credit their victories to their own prowess, and their losses to bad breaks, lousy officiating, or the other team's exceptional performance. After receiving poor grades on a test, most students in a half-dozen studies criticized the test, not themselves. On insurance forms, drivers have explained accidents in such words as: "An invisible car came out of nowhere, struck my car, and vanished." "As I reached an intersection, a hedge sprang up, obscuring my vision, and I did not see the other car." "A pedestrian hit me and went under my car." The question "What have I done to deserve this?" is one we usually ask of our troubles, not our successes—those, we assume we deserve.

**Most people see themselves as better than average.** This is true for nearly any commonplace behavior that is subjectively assessed and socially desirable:

- In national surveys, most business executives say they are more ethical than their average counterpart.
- In several studies, 90 percent of business managers and more than 90 percent of college professors rated their performance as superior to that of their average peer.
- In the National Survey of Families and Households, 49 percent of men said they provided half or more of the child care, though only 31 percent of their wives or partners saw things that way (Galinsky et al., 2008).
- In Australia, 86 percent of people rate their job performance as above average, and only 1 percent as below average.

The phenomenon, which reflects the overestimation of self rather than the underestimation of others (Epley & Dunning, 2000), is less striking in Asia, where people value modesty (Falk et al., 2009; Heine & Hamamura, 2007). Yet self-serving biases have been observed worldwide: among Dutch, Australian, and Chinese students; Japanese drivers; Indian Hindus; and French people of most walks of life. In every one of 53 countries surveyed, people expressed self-esteem above the midpoint of the most widely used scale (Schmitt & Allik, 2005).

Ironically, people even see themselves as more immune than others to self-serving bias (Pronin, 2007). The world, it seems, is Garrison Keillor's fictional Lake Wobegon writ

"If you are like most people, then like most people, you don't know you're like most people. Science has given us a lot of facts about the average person, and one of the most reliable of these facts is the average person doesn't see herself as average."

-DANIEL GILBERT, *STUMBLING ON HAPPINESS*, 2006

### PEANUTS



large—a place where “all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average.” And so are the pets. Three in four owners believe their pet is smarter than average (Nier, 2004).

Threatened egotism, more than low self-esteem, it seems, predisposes aggression. This is true even in childhood, when the recipe for frequent fighting mixes high self-esteem with social rejection. The most aggressive children tend to have high self-regard that gets punctured by other kids’ dislike (van Bostel et al., 2004).

An adolescent or adult whose swelled head is deflated by insults is potentially dangerous. Finding their self-esteem threatened, people with large egos may react violently. “Aryan pride” fueled Nazi atrocities. “These biases have the effect of making wars more likely to begin and more difficult to end,” noted Daniel Kahneman and Jonathan Renshon (2007).

Brad Bushman and Roy Baumeister (1998; Bushman et al., 2009) experimented with what they call the “dark side of high self-esteem.” They had 540 undergraduate volunteers write a brief essay, in response to which another supposed student gave them either praise (“Great essay!”) or stinging criticism (“One of the worst essays I have read!”). Then the essay writers played a reaction-time game against the other student. After wins, they could assault their opponent with noise of any intensity for any duration.

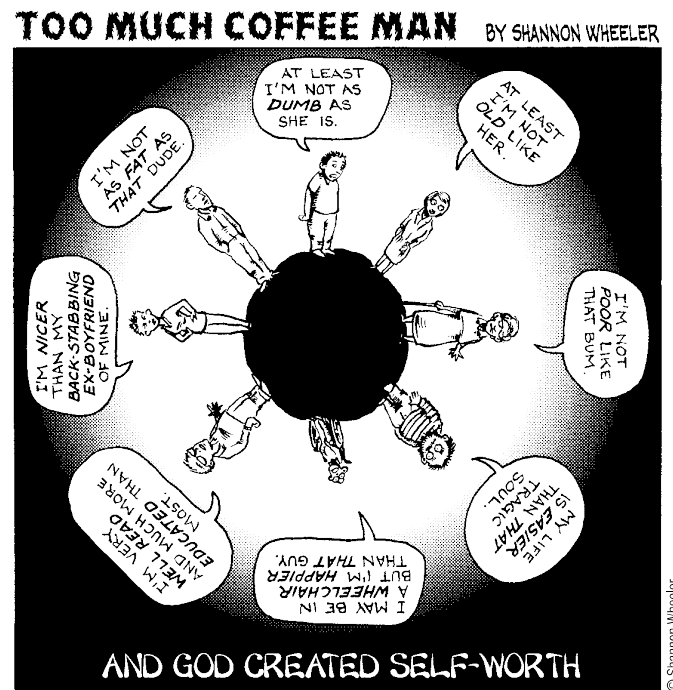
Can you anticipate the result? After criticism, those with inflated high self-esteem were “exceptionally aggressive.” They delivered three times the auditory torture of those with normal self-esteem. “Encouraging people to feel good about themselves when they haven’t earned it” poses problems, Baumeister (2001) concluded. “Conceited, self-important individuals turn nasty toward those who puncture their bubbles of self-love.”

Are self-serving perceptions on the rise in North America? Some researchers believe they are. From 1980 to 2007, popular song lyrics became more self-focused (DeWall et al., 2011). From 1988 to 2008, self-esteem scores increased among American collegians, high schoolers, and especially middle school students (Gentile et al., 2010). On one prominent self-esteem inventory on which 40 is the highest possible self-esteem score, 51 percent of 2008 collegians scored 35 or more.

**Narcissism**—excessive self-love and self-absorption—is also rising, reports psychologist Jean Twenge (2006; Twenge & Foster, 2010). After tracking self-importance across the last several decades, Twenge found that what she calls *Generation Me* (born in the 1980s and 1990s) is expressing more narcissism by agreeing more often with statements such as, “If I ruled the world, it would be a better place,” or “I think I am a special person.” Agreement with such narcissistic statements correlates with materialism, the desire to be famous, inflated expectations, more hookups with fewer committed relationships, more gambling, and more cheating, all of which have been increasing as narcissism has increased.

Some critics of the concept of self-serving bias claim that it overlooks those who feel worthless and unlovable: If self-serving bias prevails, why do so many people disparage themselves? For four reasons:

- Self-directed put-downs can be *subtly strategic*: They elicit reassuring strokes. Saying “No one likes me” may at least elicit “But not everyone has met you!”
- Before an important event, such as a game or a test, self-disparaging comments *prepare us for possible failure*. The coach who extols the superior strength of the upcoming opponent makes a loss understandable, a victory noteworthy.
- A self-disparaging “How could I have been so stupid!” can help us *learn from our mistakes*.



“The enthusiastic claims of the self-esteem movement mostly range from fantasy to hogwash. The effects of self-esteem are small, limited, and not all good.”  
—ROY BAUMEISTER (1996)

**narcissism** excessive self-love and self-absorption.



"If you compare yourself with others, you may become vain and bitter; for always there will be greater and lesser persons than yourself." -Max EHRMANN, "DESIDERATA," 1927

- Self-disparagement frequently *pertains to one's old self*. Asked to remember their really bad behaviors, people recall things from long ago; good behaviors more easily come to mind from their recent past (Escobedo & Adolphs, 2010). People are much more critical of their distant past selves than of their current selves—even when they have not changed (Wilson & Ross, 2001). "At 18, I was a jerk; today I'm more sensitive." In their own eyes, chumps yesterday, champs today.

Even so, it's true: All of us some of the time, and some of us much of the time, do feel inferior—especially when we compare ourselves with those who are a step or two higher on the ladder of status, looks, income, or ability. The deeper and more frequently we have such feelings, the more unhappy, even depressed, we are. But for most people, thinking has a naturally positive bias.

While recognizing the dark side of self-serving bias and self-esteem, some researchers prefer isolating the effects of two types of self-esteem—defensive and secure (Kernis, 2003; Lambird & Mann, 2006; Ryan & Deci, 2004). *Defensive self-esteem* is fragile. It focuses on sustaining itself, which makes failures and criticism feel threatening. Such egotism exposes one to perceived threats, which feed anger and disorder, note Jennifer Crocker and Lora Park (2004).

*Secure self-esteem* is less fragile, because it is less contingent on external evaluations. To feel accepted for who we are, and not for our looks, wealth, or acclaim, relieves pressures to succeed and enables us to focus beyond ourselves. By losing ourselves in relationships and purposes larger than self, Crocker and Park add, we may achieve a more secure self-esteem and greater quality of life.

## Before You Move On

### ► ASK YOURSELF

What possible selves do you dream of—or fear—becoming? To what extent do these imagined selves motivate you now?

### ► TEST YOURSELF

In a 1997 Gallup poll, White Americans estimated 44 percent of their fellow White Americans to be high in prejudice (scoring them 5 or higher on a 10-point scale). How many rated themselves similarly high in prejudice? Just 14 percent. What phenomenon does this illustrate?

*Answers to the Test Yourself questions can be found in Appendix E at the end of the book.*

## Culture and the Self

### 59-5 How do individualist and collectivist cultures influence people?

Imagine that someone were to rip away your social connections, making you a solitary refugee in a foreign land. How much of your identity would remain intact?

If as our solitary traveler you pride yourself on your **individualism**, a great deal of your identity would remain intact—the very core of your being, the sense of “me,” the awareness of your personal convictions and values. Individualists (often people from North America, Western Europe, Australia, or New Zealand) give relatively greater priority to personal goals and define their identity mostly in terms of personal attributes (Schimmack et al., 2005). They strive for personal control and individual achievement. In American culture, with its relatively big *I* and small *we*, 85 percent of people have agreed that it is possible “to pretty much be who you want to be” (Sampson, 2000).

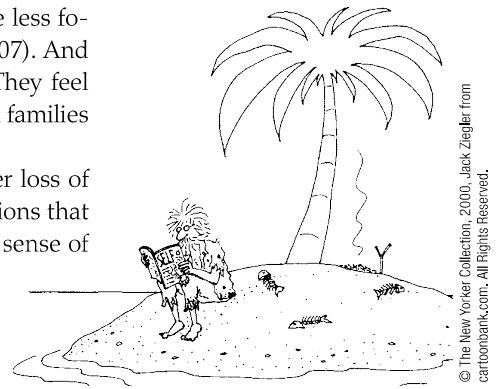
**individualism** giving priority to one's own goals over group goals and defining one's identity in terms of personal attributes rather than group identifications.

Individualists share the human need to belong. They join groups. But they are less focused on group harmony and doing their duty to the group (Brewer & Chen, 2007). And being more self-contained, they more easily move in and out of social groups. They feel relatively free to switch places of worship, switch jobs, or even leave their extended families and migrate to a new place. Marriage is often for as long as they both shall love.

If set adrift in a foreign land as a **collectivist**, you might experience a greater loss of identity. Cut off from family, groups, and loyal friends, you would lose the connections that have defined who you are. In a collectivist culture, group identifications provide a sense of belonging, a set of values, a network of caring individuals, an assurance of security. In return, collectivists have deeper, more stable attachments to their groups—their family, clan, or company. In South Korea, for example, people place less value on expressing a consistent, unique self-concept, and more on tradition and shared practices (Choi & Choi, 2002).

Valuing communal solidarity means placing a premium on preserving group spirit and ensuring that others never lose face. What people say reflects not only what they feel (their inner attitudes) but what they presume others feel (Kashima et al., 1992). Avoiding direct confrontation, blunt honesty, and uncomfortable topics, collectivists often defer to others' wishes and display a polite, self-effacing humility (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Elders and superiors receive respect, and duty to family may trump personal career and mate preferences (Zhang & Kline, 2009). In new groups, people may be shy and more easily embarrassed than their individualist counterparts (Singelis et al., 1995, 1999). Compared with Westerners, people in Japanese and Chinese cultures, for example, exhibit greater shyness toward strangers and greater concern for social harmony and loyalty (Bond, 1988; Cheek & Melchior, 1990; Triandis, 1994). When the priority is “we,” not “me,” that individualized latte—“decaf, single shot, skinny, extra hot”—that feels so good to a North American in a coffee shop might sound more like a selfish demand in Seoul (Kim & Markus, 1999).

To be sure, there is diversity within cultures. Even in the most individualist countries, some people manifest collectivist values. Within many countries, there are also distinct cultures related to one's religion, economic status, and region (Cohen, 2009). And in collectivist Japan, a spirit of individualism marks the “northern frontier” island of Hokkaido (Kitayama et al., 2006). But in general, people (especially men) in competitive, individualist cultures have more personal freedom, are less geographically bound to their families, enjoy more privacy, and take more pride in personal achievements (**TABLE 59.3** on the next page).



**Collectivist culture** Although the United States is largely individualist, many cultural subgroups remain collectivist. This is true for many Alaska Natives, who demonstrate respect for tribal elders, and whose identity springs largely from their group affiliations.

“One needs to cultivate the spirit of sacrificing the *little me* to achieve the benefits of the *big me*.” —CHINESE SAYING

**Considerate collectivists** Japan's collectivist values, including duty to others and social harmony, were on display after the devastating 2011 earthquake and tsunami. Virtually no looting was reported, and residents remained calm and orderly, as shown here while waiting for drinking water.



**collectivism** giving priority to the goals of one's group (often one's extended family or work group) and defining one's identity accordingly.

**Table 59.3** Value Contrasts Between Individualism and Collectivism

Concept	Individualism	Collectivism
<i>Self</i>	Independent (identity from individual traits)	Interdependent (identity from belonging)
<i>Life task</i>	Discover and express one's uniqueness	Maintain connections, fit in, perform role
<i>What matters</i>	Me—personal achievement and fulfillment; rights and liberties; self-esteem	Us—group goals and solidarity; social responsibilities and relationships; family duty
<i>Coping method</i>	Change reality	Accommodate to reality
<i>Morality</i>	Defined by individuals (self-based)	Defined by social networks (duty-based)
<i>Relationships</i>	Many, often temporary or casual; confrontation acceptable	Few, close and enduring; harmony valued
<i>Attributing behavior</i>	Behavior reflects one's personality and attitudes	Behavior reflects social norms and roles

Sources: Adapted from Thomas Schoeneman (1994) and Harry Triandis (1994).

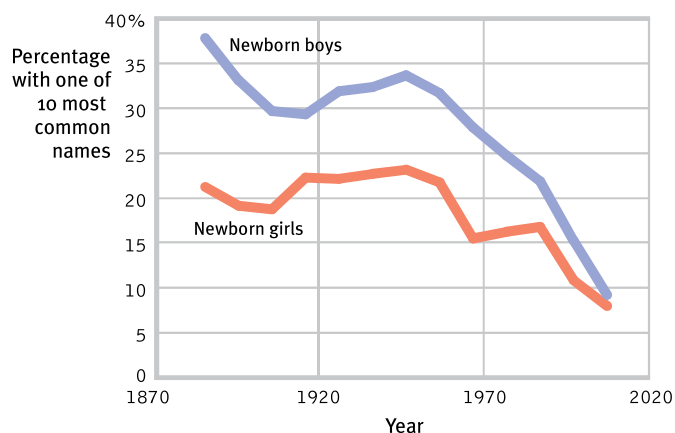
They even prefer unusual names, as psychologist Jean Twenge noticed while seeking a name for her first child. Over time, the most common American names listed by year on the U.S. Social Security baby names website were becoming less desirable. When she and her colleagues (2010) analyzed the first names of 325 million American babies born between

1880 and 2007, they confirmed this trend. As **FIGURE 59.3** illustrates, the percentage of boys and girls given one of the 10 most common names for their birth year has plunged, especially in recent years. (No wonder my parents, who welcomed my arrival in a less individualist age, gave me such a common first name.)

The individualist-collectivist divide appeared in reactions to medals received during the 2000 and 2002 Olympic games. U.S. gold medal winners and the U.S. media covering them attributed the achievements mostly to the athletes themselves (Markus et al., 2006). “I think I just stayed focused,” explained swimming gold medalist Misty Hyman. “It was time to show the world what I could do. I am just glad I was able to do it.” Japan’s gold medalist in the women’s marathon, Naoko Takahashi, had a different explanation: “Here is the best coach in the world, the best

manager in the world, and all of the people who support me—all of these things were getting together and became a gold medal.” Even when describing friends, Westerners tend to use trait-describing adjectives (“*she is helpful*”), whereas East Asians more often use verbs that describe behaviors in context (“*she helps her friends*”) (Heine & Buchtel, 2009; Maass et al., 2006).

Individualism’s benefits can come at the cost of more loneliness, higher divorce and homicide rates, and more stress-related disease (Popenoe, 1993; Triandis et al., 1988). Demands for more romance and personal fulfillment in marriage can subject relationships to more pressure (Dion & Dion, 1993). In one survey, “keeping romance alive” was rated as important to a good marriage by 78 percent of U.S. women but only 29 percent of Japanese women (*American Enterprise*, 1992). In China, love songs often express enduring commitment and friendship (Rothbaum & Tsang, 1998): “We will be together from now on. . . I will never change from now to forever.”

**Figure 59.3**

**A child like no other** Americans' individualist tendencies are reflected in their choice of names for their babies. In recent years, the percentage of American babies receiving one of that year's 10 most common names has plunged. (Adapted from Twenge et al., 2010.)

## Before You Move On

### ► ASK YOURSELF

Which concept best describes you—collectivist or individualist? Do you fit completely in either category, or are you sometimes a collectivist and sometimes an individualist?

### ► TEST YOURSELF

How do individualist and collectivist cultures differ?

*Answers to the Test Yourself questions can be found in Appendix E at the end of the book.*

## Module 59 Review

### 59-1 Who first proposed the social-cognitive perspective, and how do social-cognitive theorists view personality development?

- Albert Bandura first proposed the *social-cognitive perspective*, which views personality as the product of the interaction between a person's traits (including thinking) and the situation—the social context.
- The *behavioral approach* contributes an understanding that our personality development is affected by learned responses.
- Social-cognitive researchers apply principles of learning, as well as cognition and social behavior, to personality.
- *Reciprocal determinism* is a term describing the interaction and mutual influence of behavior, internal personal factors, and environmental factors.
- Research on how we interact with our environment evolved into research on the effects of optimism and pessimism, which led to a broader *positive psychology*.

### 59-2 How do social-cognitive researchers explore behavior, and what criticism have they faced?

- Social-cognitive researchers tend to believe that the best way to predict someone's behavior in a given situation is to observe that person's behavior in similar situations.
- They have been faulted for underemphasizing the importance of unconscious dynamics, emotions, and inner traits. Their response is that the social-cognitive perspective builds on psychology's well-established concepts of learning and cognition and reminds us of the power of situations.

### 59-3 Why has psychology generated so much research on the self? How important is self-esteem to psychology and to human well-being?

- The *self* is the center of personality, organizing our thoughts, feelings, and actions.
- Considering possible selves helps motivate us toward positive development, but focusing too intensely on ourselves can lead to the *spotlight effect*.
- High *self-esteem* (our feeling of self-worth) is beneficial, but unrealistically high self-esteem is dangerous (linked to aggressive behavior) and fragile.
- *Self-efficacy* is our sense of competence.

### 59-4 What evidence reveals self-serving bias, and how do defensive and secure self-esteem differ?

- *Self-serving bias* is our tendency to perceive ourselves favorably, as when viewing ourselves as better than average or when accepting credit for our successes but not blame for our failures.
- Defensive self-esteem is fragile, focuses on sustaining itself, and views failure or criticism as a threat.
- Secure self-esteem enables us to feel accepted for who we are.



## 59-5

## How do individualist and collectivist cultures influence people?

- Within any culture, the degree of *individualism* or *collectivism* varies from person to person. Cultures based on self-reliant individualism, like those found in North America and Western Europe, tend to value personal independence and individual achievement. They define identity in terms of self-esteem, personal goals and attributes, and personal rights and liberties. Cultures based on socially connected collectivism, like those in many parts of Asia and Africa, tend to value interdependence, tradition, and harmony, and they define identity in terms of group goals, commitments, and belonging to one's group.

## Multiple-Choice Questions

- Who of the following is considered the leading advocate of personality's social-cognitive approach?
  - Gordon Allport
  - Carl Jung
  - Karen Horney
  - Carl Rogers
  - Albert Bandura
- The way we explain negative and positive events is called
  - personal control.
  - reciprocal determinism.
  - positive psychology.
  - attributional style.
  - situational assessment.
- Which of the following is an example of an assessment likely to be used by a social-cognitive psychologist?
  - A student teacher is formally observed and evaluated in front of the classroom.
  - A person applying for a managerial position takes the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator.
  - A defendant in a criminal case is interviewed by a court-appointed psychologist.
  - In a premarriage counseling session, a young couple responds to ambiguous inkblots.
  - A depressed young man is asked by his therapist to relax on a couch and talk about whatever comes to mind.
- Which of the following is an example of self-efficacy?
  - Manuela believes others are always watching her.
  - Abraham believes he is a good person.
  - Rasheed believes he is a competent skater.
  - Saundra believes it rained because she's been wishing for rain for days.
  - Igor maintains his optimism despite doing poorly in his math class.
- Which of the following is most likely to be true of a person from an individualistic culture?
  - His behavior would be a reflection of his personality and attitudes.
  - He would cope by accommodating to reality.
  - He would view his life task as fitting in and maintaining connections.
  - He would strive to develop a few close and enduring relationships.
  - He would focus on his duty to his family.

## Practice FRQs

- Briefly describe the two main components of the self-serving bias.
- Heidi is an exceptionally avid reader of books. Explain how the three types of factors in reciprocal determinism might interact to support Heidi's desire to read.

## Answer

**1 point:** People are more likely to take credit for their successes than their failures.

**1 point:** Most people see themselves as above average.

**(3 points)**