

**Personality Traits and Psychometric Testing:
To be or not to be....**

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The word **psychometric** comes from the Greek words for mental (psycho) and measurement (metric). Psychometric testing is ubiquitous in social and behavioral science research. These tests, surveys, or questionnaires attempt to reveal an individual's character, or psychological makeup, by *objectively* measuring aspects of personality such as temperament, anxiety, attitudes, leadership and followership traits, morality, ethics, mental ability, cognition, and conation (drive).

According to Kaplan and Saccuzzo (2010), the first formal personality test was developed in the early 1920s to assist with personnel selection in the armed forces. However, as far back as Plato's *Republic* there is mention of personality taxonomies or descriptions of different 'characters.' Plato's descriptions of the ideal personality for leadership included quick intelligence, good memory, sagacity, and cleverness. Plato warned that individuals who possess these characteristics could be high-spirited, magnanimous, and driven by the impulse to obtain and maintain power. Plato contended that leaders could also be impregnable to fear, and immovable even when faced with new or contradictory information (Plato, 2002). In the 21st century there are numerous varieties of personality and trait tests. Some of the most common ones include the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI), and the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ).

There are two dominant and conflicting theories regarding personality: the belief that personality is fixed (sometimes referred to as the ‘entity’ theory), and the belief that personality traits are malleable (sometimes referred to as the ‘incremental’ theory). Those in the *fixed* camp contend that personality qualities, such as intelligence, character, attitudes, and leadership, are static traits and stable over time and impervious to situations (Chiu, Hong, & Dweck, C. S., 1997). *Incrementalists* support the theory that personality traits are malleable and can be developed through efforts and education.

If your study includes psychometric measures, then the significance of your study depends upon the theory of personality you support. If you believe that personality is encoded in our genes, and impossible to change (fixed), then a study designed to determine a correlation between, for example, leadership traits and working conditions would suggest that obtaining a leader who is a good ‘fit’ requires locating a person with those desirable characteristics to lead the organization.

By contrast, incremental theorists contend that personality is not simply encoded in our genetic makeup, but is a flexible and dynamic entity (Mischel & Shoda, 1995), that changes occur over a life span, and that personality is shaped by experiences and situations (Roberts, Walton, & Viechtbauer, 2006). If you support this view, then the same study that determined a correlation between leadership traits and working conditions would suggest professional development training and/or coaching could be used to shape current leaders to meet organizational needs. To drill down further, you might support the *Learning Theory of Attitude Change* that classical conditioning, operant conditioning, and observational learning and awareness can bring about desired change. A slight variation on this theory would be the *Dissonance Theory of Attitude Change* or the belief that people can change their attitudes when

conflicting views exist, and when there is an acknowledged need to reduce the tension created by incompatible attitudes.

At the descriptive level, it is important to distinguished between personality as we see ourselves (our identity) and personality as others see us (our reputation). If, for example, you are looking to measure the leadership traits of a CEO, you need to decide if the CEO will be doing a self-assessment of her leadership or if her employees will be supplying theses data. You might also opt to do both and determine the congruence of these views (Hogan & Kaiser, 2005).

In summary, if your study involves psychometric measures you need to determine how you view personality; static or dynamic, and decide how data will be obtained; self-reporting or by relying on the observation of others, prior to data collection.

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