FREE STUDY NOTES

Trait Theories of Personality

Allport, Cattell, Eysenck and the Big Five in simple words

In one line

Trait theories say personality is made of **stable traits** that differ from person to person and show up across situations. Traits are measured on a scale, not sorted into boxes.

Key points

- A **trait** is a lasting pattern of thought, feeling and behaviour. A **state** is a short feeling.
- Traits are fairly stable, differ between people and show across situations.
- Four main models: **Allport, Cattell, Eysenck and the Big Five**.
- Main criticism: trait theory **describes** people but does not **explain** them.

Who gave what

Year	Person	What happened
1936	Allport and Odbert	Found about 4,500 English words that describe people
1937	Allport	Set out his trait ideas in a book on personality
1940s	Cattell	Cut the list down to 16 source traits
1947	Eysenck	Studied 700 soldiers and found two main dimensions
Around 1970	Eysenck	Added a third dimension, psychoticism
Later	Costa, McCrae and others	Built the Big Five model

Allport: three levels of traits

Level	Meaning	Example
Cardinal	One dominant trait that shapes almost everything. Rare.	A teacher whose whole life is built around helping students
Central	The 5 to 10 core traits that describe a person	Honest, sociable, optimistic, careful
Secondary	Traits that show only in some situations	Nervous before an interview

Cattell: the 16 personality factors

Cattell started with Allport's long word list, cut it to about 171 traits and used factor analysis to reach **16 source traits**. **Surface traits** are visible behaviours. **Source traits** are the hidden causes behind them.

No.	Factor	Low score	High score
1	Warmth	Aloof	Caring
2	Reasoning	Concrete	Abstract
3	Emotional Stability	Easily rattled	Steady
4	Dominance	Accommodating	Assertive
5	Liveliness	Sober	Spontaneous
6	Rule-Consciousness	Flexible	Principled
7	Social Boldness	Timid	Daring
8	Sensitivity	Hard-nosed	Tender-minded
9	Vigilance	Trusting	Suspicious
10	Abstractedness	Practical	Imaginative
11	Privateness	Open	Discreet
12	Apprehension	Self-assured	Worried
13	Openness to Change	Traditional	Open to new ideas
14	Self-Reliance	Group-oriented	Independent
15	Perfectionism	Tolerant of disorder	Organised
16	Tension	Relaxed	Driven, impatient

Test length. The 16PF fifth edition has 185 items. The sixth edition (2018) has 155 items. The 16 factors group into five global factors: Extraversion, Anxiety, Tough-Mindedness, Independence and Self-Control.

Eysenck: the PEN model

- **P**sychoticism: coldness, impulsiveness vs self-control and empathy. A personality scale, not a diagnosis.
- **E**xtraversion: sociable and outgoing vs quiet and reserved.
- **N**euroticism: anxious and easily stressed vs calm and steady.

	Extravert	Introvert
Stable	Sanguine	Phlegmatic
Unstable (neurotic)	Choleric	Melancholic

Big Five (OCEAN)

Trait	High score	Low score
Openness	Curious, imaginative	Practical, prefers routine
Conscientiousness	Organised, dependable	Spontaneous, careless
Extraversion	Sociable, energetic	Reserved, quiet
Agreeableness	Kind, cooperative	Competitive, blunt
Neuroticism	Anxious, moody	Calm, steady

Compare the four models

Model	Traits	Method	Key idea
Allport	3 levels	Grouped a dictionary word list	Traits are real structures inside a person
Cattell	16 source traits	Factor analysis	Hidden source traits drive behaviour
Eysenck	3 dimensions	Factor analysis and biology	Personality has a biological base
Big Five	5 broad traits	Statistical analysis of trait data	Five scales cover most of personality

Type vs trait

Basis	Type theory	Trait theory
Idea	One category per person	A score on many scales
Example	Introvert or extravert	Extraversion from low to high
Theorists	Sheldon, Kretschmer, Jung	Allport, Cattell, Eysenck
Weakness	Most people sit between boxes	Describes but does not explain

Criticisms of trait theory

- **Describes, does not explain.** It tells you what traits exist, not fully why.
- **Person-situation debate.** Hartshorne and May (1928) found children were not equally honest in every situation. Epstein (1979) replied that behaviour averaged over many situations shows clear patterns.
- **Self-report and faking.** People can answer to look good or misjudge themselves.
- **Cultural bias.** Much work used Western samples. Ashton and colleagues (2004) found six factors across seven languages.
- **Change.** Two large 2026 studies found people underestimate how much personality changes with time.

Exam corner

5 marks: characteristics of trait theories

Traits are stable, differ between people, show across situations and are measured on a scale. Main models: Allport, Cattell, Eysenck, Big Five.

10 marks: structure

1. Define trait and trait theory. 2. Characteristics. 3. Allport. 4. Cattell. 5. Eysenck. 6. Big Five. 7. Two strengths. 8. Three criticisms. 9. One line conclusion.

Quick answers: Freud did not give a trait theory (psychodynamic). Cattell found 16 source traits. Big Five = Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Neuroticism. There is no official list of five trait theories; if a question says five traits, it means the Big Five.

Self check

Question	Your answer
Name Allport's three levels of traits.	
What is a source trait?	
Write the three PEN dimensions.	
Give one strength and one criticism.	

Sources: Britannica (trait theories); DIW Berlin summary of 2026 personality change studies (Oct 2026); Cattell, Allport and Eysenck primary works as summarised in standard textbooks. Full article: personaguru.in/trait-theories-of-personality/