

The Three-Factor Theory of Personality

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There has been a plethora of theories of personality and measures of personality generated by psychologists during this century. However, something approaching a consensus about personality has developed in recent years. The consensus is developing around a model referred to as the Five-Factor Model (FFM), also called the Big Five. The five traits represented in this model are Extroversion, Emotional Instability, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness. One critic of the FFM, Hans Eysenck, is the originator of an older alternative model sometimes referred to as the Even Bigger Three or EB3. The EB3 employs these traits Extroversion, Neuroticism (or Emotional Instability) and Psychoticism.

The Eysenck model is preferred by the author for three reasons. First, this theory of personality is strongly supported by a very long and continuous history of research and development. Eysenck's dedication to research on personality has made him the most frequently cited psychologist in the world. Eysenck points out that nearly all large-scale studies of personality find the equivalent of the three traits he proposes, that the traits are found worldwide, that an individual's status relative to the traits is consistent across time and that research on the genetics of personality support the three traits. Second, the development of the theory and related research has focused on measurement. The instrument associated with the model includes both adult and child versions, which makes comparisons between teachers and students possible and extends the possible areas for research. Third, it is a rich explanatory theory that suggests many potential research hypotheses in contrast to the FFM, which is largely a descriptive model.

The three Eysenckian traits can be briefly characterized as follows. The Extroversion trait is represented by a bipolar scale that is anchored at the high end by sociability and stimulation seeking and at the other end by social reticence and stimulation avoidance. This trait is tied to basal levels of arousal in the neocortex. The Neuroticism trait is anchored at the high end by emotional instability and spontaneity and by reflection and deliberateness at the other end. This trait's name is based on the susceptibility of individuals high on the N trait to anxiety-based problems. This trait is related to one's degree of reactivity to emotional stimuli. The Psychoticism trait is anchored at the high end by aggressiveness and divergent thinking and at the low end by caution and empathy. The label for this trait is based on the susceptibility of a significant sub-group of individuals high on the P trait to psychotic disorders. This trait is polygenic in nature and may, to some degree, be a reflection of the amygdale's sensitivity to androgen. None of the traits are intended as indicators of psychopathology. The scales based on these traits are measures of temperament source traits that in interaction with experience produce personality.

Eysenck's theory and the research it has generated suggest linkage to a variety of developmental problems such as over-activity, shyness, antisocial behavior, and anxiety disorders, as well as other characteristics such as creativity. Center and Kemp have discussed how the theory and research might be applied to dealing with children and youth with antisocial behavior. James Wakefield has described the implications of the EB3 theory for educational settings and learning. In his discussion of the Eysenck's personality traits, he covers each relative to behavior, central nervous system (CNS) arousal, learning, discipline, and achievement. The details of that discussion are too

involved to cover here but are well worth reading. Further, Wakefield has worked out twelve of the possible combination scores that a student might get on the Eysenck instruments (see table below).

PEN Combinations	Descriptive Labels
1. Low or Avg P, Avg E, Low or Avg N	Typical, The majority of children.
2. Low or Avg P, High E, Low or Avg N	Sociable and Uninhibited
3. Low or Avg P, Low E, Low or Avg N	Shy and Inhibited
4. Low or Avg P, Avg E, High N	Emotionally Over-reactive
5. Low or Avg P, High E, High N	Hyperactive
6. Low or Avg P, Low E, High N	Anxious
7. High P, Avg E, Low or Avg N	Disruptive and Aggressive
8. High P, High E, Low or Avg N	Extremely Impulsive
9. High P, Low E, Low or Avg N	Withdrawn and Hostile
10. High P, Avg E, High N	Frequently Agitated
11. High P, High E, High N	Very Disruptive and Aggressive
12. High P, Low E, High N	Very Anxious and Agitated

Wakefield also offers descriptions of and suggestions for working with students having these personality (temperament) patterns (see table below). The EB3 theory has a great deal of heuristic potential for education on a variety of fronts and should receive more attention than it has in the past.

	Behavior	Arousal	Learning	Discipline
High E	Works quickly Careless Easily distracted Easily bored	Works well under stress from external stimulation.	Focus on major points. Needs continuous reinforcement. Good short-term recall. Does best in elementary school.	Most responsive to rewards and prompts, but also responsive to punishment and admonitions.
Low E	Works slowly Careful Attentive Motivated	Works poorly under stress from external stimulation.	Intermittent reinforcement is sufficient. Good long-term recall. Does best in high school.	Most responsive to punishment and admonitions, but also responsive to rewards and prompts.
High N	Over reacts to emotional stimuli. Slow to calm down. Avoids emotional situations	Easy arousal interferes with performance, especially on difficult tasks. Susceptible to test anxiety.	Compulsive approach to learning. Can study for long periods. Does best in high school.	Similar to low E but high N in combination with low E requires a more subdued approach.
Low N	Under reacts to emotional stimuli. Quick recovery from emotional arousal.	Hard to motivate and tends to underachieve. Needs high arousal to sustain effort on easy tasks.	Exploratory learner. Short study periods are best. Does best in elementary school.	Similar to high E. However, both reward and punishment need to be more intense.
High P	Solitary Disregard for danger. Defiant and aggressive.	Seeks stimulation for an arousal high. Confrontation and punishment may stimulate.	Slow to learn from experience. Responds impulsively. Creative, if bright	Stimulated by punishment and threats. Responds best to highly structured settings.
Low P	Sociable Friendly Empathetic	Not a sensation seeker. Can be too "laid back."	Teachable Convergent thinker. Does well in school.	Responsive to both reward and punishment.

Suggested Reading

- Center, D., & Kemp, D. (2003). Temperament and personality as potential factors in the development and treatment of conduct disorders. *Education and Treatment of Children*. Available at: <http://www.davidcenter.com>
- Center, D., & Kemp, D. (2002). Antisocial behavior in children and Eysenck's theory of personality: An evaluation. *International Journal of Disability, Development, and Education*, 49(4), 353-366. (Available at <http://www.davidcenter.com>)
- Eysenck, H. J. (1991). Dimensions of personality: the biosocial approach to personality. In J. Strelau and A. Angleitner (Eds.), *Explorations in temperament: International perspectives on theory and measurement* (pp. 87-103). London: Plenum.
- Eysenck, H. J. (1991). Dimensions of personality: 16, 5, or 3 -Criteria for a taxonomic paradigm. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 12 (8), 773-790.
- Wakefield, J. (1979). *Using personality to individualize instruction*. San Diego: Educational and Industrial Testing Service.