



Teaching & Learning Guide for: A Really Big Picture of Personality

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Authors' Introduction

Whatever personality is, you cannot hold it in your hand, see it under a microscope, through a telescope, or identify it as a group of neurons. This has led to discussions about exactly what and where personality is. During the 20th century, personality was identified among non-psychologists as a dominant social characteristic of a person, such as 'shyness' or 'charisma'. Among psychologists themselves, personality has been identified in diverse ways. For example, according to a definition by Henry Stack Sullivan, an influential 20th century psychologist, personality is the emerging relational pattern between two people. This definition was influential but, like many others, was never widely accepted.

A fundamental aspect of studying a topic is knowing what and where it is. A consensus has emerged over the past several decades as to personality's location and definition. The article, 'A Really Big Picture of Personality', addresses contemporary views on this topic. The article employs two models, a 'positional' model to talk about where personality is located and an 'inner functional' model that describes what personality does.

In the positional model, personality is located as emerging from brain processes inside the person, as expressing itself in the situations faced by the individual, and as being a member of larger social groups. In the inner model, personality organizes an individual's major psychological subsystems – the person's motives and emotions, thoughts and intelligences, social plans and preferences, and self-control.

Anchoring personality's location and its inner functions helps focus the study of personality. Anyone who wishes to learn about personality can clarify his or her own thinking by learning about this view. The article makes the point that non-psychologists can benefit from learning about these big pictures of personality because these views help depict all the influences on and parts of a given person, and consequently, can help us better appreciate the psychological situation and qualities of another person. In the article, the personality models are illustrated with examples from the psychology and life of the composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

Because the article introduces where and what personality is, it can be assigned in classes that introduce or otherwise concern the study of personality. These courses or course segments typically include the Personality Psychology section of an Introductory Psychology course, an undergraduate Personality Psychology course, or a Graduate Seminar on Personality.

Authors Recommend

McAdams, D. P. (1995). What do we know when we know a person? *Journal of Personality*, *63*, 365–396.

This lively article explores the feeling of knowing someone and how it comes about. McAdams suggests that when one tries to understand another person, it occurs at three levels: the level of knowing another person's traits, the level of knowing the person's concerns and motives, and the level of knowing the person's life history. As one moves across the three levels from understanding a person's traits to his or her particular life story, one's sense of knowing the other person grows stronger. Lessons are drawn from this model as to how to study personality.

McAdams' article provides an engaging yet contrasting view to the 'Big Picture' article. Both articles present frameworks for understanding another person, and those frameworks are rather different. The differences can prompt discussion as to the relative merits of each approach to knowing someone.

Chapter 2 from Allport, G. W. (1937). *Personality: A Psychological Interpretation*. New York: Henry Holt & Co.

In this classic chapter from the history of psychology, Gordon Allport reviews 50 definitions of the term 'Personality' from the Greek concept of 'persona' (a theater mask) to his own then-contemporary definition. The chapter is drawn from one of the first personality textbooks of the 20th century. Many texts since have referred to Allport's '50 definitions' as a foundation for defining the term and as setting the stage for contemporary definitions of personality. The chapter is fairly easy reading, and a convenient chart of the lineage of various definitions of personality is provided.

Lombardo, G. P., & Foschi, R. (2002). The European origins of 'personality psychology'. *European Psychologist*, *7*, 134–145.

In the United States, the beginnings of personality psychology are traced to Allport's 1937 textbook on the topic, or A. A. Roback's 1927 earlier contribution. In this article, Lombardo and Foschi provide a perspective on the philosophers, psychologists, and physicians in Europe who helped create the discipline. The clear and thorough background described, together with American histories of the field, provide a rich background as to the origins of the discipline.

Barenbaum, N. B., & Winter, D. G. (2008). History of modern personality theory and research. In: O. P. John, R. Robins & L. A. Pervin (Eds.), *Handbook of Personality Psychology: Theory and Research* (pp. 3–26; 3rd edn). New York, USA: Guilford Press.

This revised version of Barenbaum and Winter's history of personality psychology, written for the third edition of the *Handbook of Personality Psychology*, traces the origins of personality psychology in both popular culture and related disciplines such as sociology and psychiatry. It provides a quick-paced overview of the influences that brought about the field, the beginning of the field itself, and the history of key ideas within the field. The history of ideas focuses especially on such issues as the status of motivations, traits, and the stability of personality across situations. Another central theme is the tension between studying the psychology of the individual versus studying personality psychometrically across many people. The article concludes with the idea of 'putting personality back together again', so as to set the stage for more integrated contemporary research about the person.

Brosnan, S. F., Newton-Fisher, N. E., & van Vugt, M. (2009). A melding of the minds: When primatology meets personality and social psychology. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, **13**, 129–147.

This article fleshes out the idea from the 'Big Picture' paper that personality emerges from the brain. Brosnan et al. focus on the similarities among brains and behaviors of humans and other primates as a means of understanding human personality and social behavior. Emphasizing personality's emergence from biological substrates, the article introduces the relation between humans and other primates, and then proceeds to examine brief case examples of research that unites such perspectives. The coverage helps indicate what has been learned about personality from studying human beings and our closest primate relatives.

Markus, H. R. (2004). Culture and personality: Brief for an arranged marriage. *Journal of Research in Personality*, **38**, 75–83.

This brief article discusses contemporary research on culture and personality, and then draws on examples from television programs and classified ads to persuasively illustrate the powerful effects that culture has on personality. Dr. Markus argues that personality is always formed within a culture and is shaped by it, and that knowing the attributes of a culture provides a means of interpreting the personalities of the individuals within it. It relates to the 'Big Picture' article by illuminating how personality, embedded in a higher level of groups and cultures, is influenced by the presence of that higher level.

Online Material

[Video] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FN9IT8Vc8kk&feature=watch_response

This video clip both reinforces and builds on the models presented in the 'Big Picture' paper. The philosopher David Chalmers discusses how emergence works from one level to another – for example, how mental life emerges from biological functioning. He introduces the idea of weak and strong emergence – where consciousness is a uniquely 'strongly emergent' force. The interviewer asks important questions likely to arise in viewers' minds. A high quality video (8:09 min)

[Video] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TFdUtCAXAUM&feature=fvw>

A person also is a part of a group. This 2 min British video introduces concepts related to sociology: the relationship between the individual and society.

Introduction to the Sample Course Syllabi

The 'Big Picture' article can be used in three types of courses: (i) Introductory Psychology, in the personality section, (ii) in the undergraduate Personality Psychology course itself, and in (iii) related graduate seminars. A sample portion of a syllabus for each kind of course is provided to illustrate its possible use.

Sample Portion of an Introductory Psychology Syllabus

Introductory Psychology

Week 1: Course Administration and Introduction

Week 2: The Biology of the Mind

Week 3: Sensation and Perception

Week 4: Learning
Week 5: Memory
Week 6: Cognition and Language
Week 7: The Intelligences
Week 8: Motivation and Behavior
Week 9: Emotions and Health

Week 10: Personality

Possible Transitional Statement: “In the weeks of coverage leading up to today, we have examined many individual aspects of a person’s mental life: Sensation, perception, memory, cognition, motives, and emotions, among them. But is there a way to put them all together? According to the early visionaries of psychology, personality psychology was the discipline responsible for showing how all the individual areas of psychology fit together in a unified system. We will begin this week with a look at a really big picture of the person and the person’s mental life: a really big picture of personality.” (Proceed with coverage of article).

Week 10: Social Psychology

Possible Transitional Statement: “Many personalities together make up the groups we know family, society, and cultures...
(and forward)

Sample Portion of an Undergraduate Personality Psychology Course Syllabus

Week 1: Course Administration and Introduction

Week 2: An Overview of Personality

Possible Transitional Statement: “Before we continue with the study of personality it is good to know where the system is and what it consists of.” (Proceed with coverage of article and other introductory material).

Week 3: Parts of Personality...
(and forward)

Sample Portion of a Graduate Personality Psychology Course Syllabus

Week 1: Administration and Introduction

Week 2: An Overview of Personality

Possible Transitional Statement: “There are a number of possible approaches used to study the field of personality psychology. Before we continue, it is worth examining several frameworks for identifying and positioning the personality system itself.”

Readings:

Chapter 2 from Allport, G. W. (1937). *Personality: A Psychological Interpretation*. New York: Henry Holt & Co.

Mayer, J. D., & Korogodsky, M. (2011). A really big picture of personality. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, *5*, 104–117.

McAdams, D. P., & Pals, J. L. (2006). A new Big Five. Fundamental principles for an integrative science of personality. *American Psychologist*, *61*, 204–217.

