

This series of articles appeared in Spring and Winter issues of Dialogue in 1994 (Vol. 9, Nos. 1 & 2) and include a statement of the System-Topics approach. (Dialogue is the newsletter of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology).

# How Should We Teach Undergraduates About Personality?

by Mark Leary

Undergraduate courses in personality fall roughly into two general types. The first ("Theories") focuses primarily on the grand theories of personality. Some instructors organize the course by specific theories or theorists, others by theoretical approaches, such as the psychodynamic, humanistic, cognitive, behavioral, and trait perspectives. Textbooks for these courses are similarly organized by specific theories, general conceptual approaches, or theorists.

The second type of personality course ("Personality Psychology") is organized around major topics, such as personality structure, self and identity, self-regulation, motivation, unconscious processes, and biological bases of personality. Classic personality theories are covered, but alongside more recent theoretical and empirical work. The textbooks for these courses either are organized around those same topics, or they devote some chapters to major theoretical orientations and other chapters to specific topics.

Traditionally, the main undergraduate personality course has tended to be in the "Theories" category. However, I think it is time for instructors to consider the relative merits of the two types. My purpose here is to suggest that students who take a single course in personality are better served by the second type.

The classic theories course does not adequately reflect contemporary personality psychology in content, perspective, or methodology. Students who take only a "Theories" course may receive inadequate exposure to important lines of work and may not have an inkling of the rich theoretical and empirical work going on in personality. In fact, a pure theories course may give students a dis-

torted view of the present state of knowledge and may fail to prepare students to understand the research they encounter in journals and elsewhere. In contrast, the personality psychology course exposes students to both classic and contemporary theories, perspectives, findings, and methods.

Of course, many courses (and textbooks) in theories of personality discuss research that is relevant to each theory or school, thereby exposing students to work in contemporary personality psychology. However, many important areas of investigation in contemporary personality psychology are not directly relevant to any of the classic theories, and little of the work being published in the primary journals in personality emerges from or bears upon traditional theories. As a result, much recent research simply does not fit easily into a course that is organized around theoretical approaches.

A second reason for my position is that many of the central ideas covered in the standard "Theories" course are unsubstantiated. Specifically, many of these theoretical positions are known to be inaccurate or inadequate, empirically untested, or simply untestable. Of course there is nothing wrong with teaching theoretical positions that do not yet have empirical support; the absence of support for an otherwise viable idea does not mean that it is wrong. However, many textbooks in theories of personality present the material as if it is known to be valid or do not adequately inform the student regarding which ideas are and are not accepted within the field. Furthermore, some instructors seem to assume that all of each theorist's ideas are worthy of stu-

dents' attention regardless of their viability. Consequently, students spend time learning the details of theoretical conceptualizations of questionable validity — time that might be better spent learning about what we do know about the psychology of personality. Many of the influential theorists' ideas have been supported by research or are widely accepted even in the absence of direct support, and these should be covered. But we should ask ourselves why we expect our students to learn the details of theoretical orientations of unknown or even questionable validity except, perhaps for historical reasons.

A third argument for my position is that the organization of the typical theories course is not optimal for teaching students about personality (although it may be appropriate for teaching about theorists or schools of thought). It strikes me as pedagogically more defensible to organize courses by content rather than by theoretical orientation. Instead of spreading material regarding, for example, unconscious processes across sections about several different theories or theorists, is it not more reasonable to integrate all of that material within a single section of the course? The contributions of various theoretical orientations, including the classic theories, can be presented, contrasted, and examined in light of empirical research. Students will develop a richer, more coherent understanding of a particular psychological process if all of the material on a particular topic is presented together and integrated.

I am not suggesting that the classic theories of personality have no place in the undergraduate curriculum. Rather, my point is that the traditional theories

course may not be the course of choice as the first or only personality course that a student takes. Furthermore, departments that currently do not offer a course in personality psychology should consider implementing one.

Classic theories of personality fit into the undergraduate curriculum in at least three places. First, every course that surveys personality psychology should include the major theories, as historical background and in discussing specific topics. Second, "Theories of Personality" is a legitimate course in its own right, assuming that students also have the opportunity to be exposed to contemporary personality psychology and that students aren't inadvertently misled to confuse classic theories with the latest findings. The theories course is perhaps best regarded as a second-level personality course that students take after obtaining a survey of personality psychology. Students who have had such a general survey are in a better position to appreciate a course on theories. Third, the classic personality theorists deserve considerable attention in courses in the history and systems of psychology, as well as in discussions of the historical underpinnings of more specific content courses.

I hope that in the not-too-distant future all psychology departments will offer a course in personality psychology alongside the traditional theories course. Such a move toward modernization of the personality course would have obvious benefits for the education of our students.

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**Deadlines for all material are March 15 and October 1.**

# Debate on How to Teach Personality

*Editors' Note. Mark Leary's column last issue on the teaching of personality prompted a record number (4) of responses. This is clearly an important and controversial issue. Here are the four replies:*

## A System-Topics Alternative

*by John D. Mayer*

Last issue, Leary argued that the theory-by-theory personality course provides students with an outmoded introduction to the field of personality psychology. Theory-by-theory courses are those that sequentially expose students to the viewpoints of such theorists as Freud, Jung, Adler, Horney, and Maslow. Leary argued that such courses can no longer adequately integrate contemporary problems in research. He and others (Craik, 1993) have described an alternative course, here termed a research topics course, that sequentially reviews major research areas of personality such as the unconscious, the self, and traits. This discussion about how to teach personality psychology is perhaps more deeply a discussion of how to think about the field of personality psychology itself. In this deeper sense, both the theory-by-theory and research-topics conceptualizations of personality can be viewed as frameworks for the field.

The framework of an academic field can be defined as an outline for how the work in that field is to be presented. What makes such a framework sublime is that it includes and organizes all the field's important theory and research. As Leary and others

have noted, the research findings of today do not always fit well within the theories of yesterday—or even within the theories of today. The research-topics framework solves this problem by covering multiple research areas (e.g., the unconscious, the self, traits) and discusses each area's theories, research, and integrative conclusions. The research-topics approach is extremely flexible because it covers a series of topics that have no particular beginning, middle, or end. As such, it can be extended as needed. But its drawbacks include that it offers no definition of personality and fails to present the person as an integrated, functioning whole.

A third alternative is the system-topics framework (Mayer, 1993). This framework defines personality as a system and sequentially describes (a) its components, (b) how those components are organized, and (c) how those components and their organization function over time. In the system-topics framework, the components topic covers such parts of personality as faculties (e.g., memory, motives), traits (e.g., extraversion, emotionality), and control mechanisms (e.g., ego, id). The organization topic describes outside control of personality (e.g., situationism), distributed control (e.g., id-ego conflicts), and hierarchical control (e.g., self-regulation). The last, developmental topic covers personality stability (e.g., cross-temporal correlations), cycles (e.g., mood swings), and stages (e.g., identity vs. role confusion). In the system-topics approach, each section builds on earlier sections in a cumulative fashion — from pieces to wholes to the growth of wholes — and discussion of more complex topics is commensurately richer and more complete.

Variants of this set of three topics (i.e., components, organization, and development) were proposed by several psychologists who made earlier attempts to reorganize the field. For example, Sears (1950) employed a version of the three topics in his *Annual Review* chapter on personality, where he treated the topics as essentially self-explanatory. For a few years thereafter, some reviewers of personality for the *Annual Review* followed Sears's outline; later reviewers, however, discarded Sears's outline because they said it was unclear. More recently, Pervin (1990, p. 12) suggested that the three topics might form the core of personality psychology, and that the field would benefit from a greater recognition of this possibility. The present, system-topics framework is an explicit clarification and development of the three topics that can be used to represent the field of personality psychology as it exists today. The developed framework integrates the best personality theory and research in such a way as to depict people as whole, dynamic organisms. Because of its many advantages, the system-topics framework may be among our most promising alternatives for conceptualizing, teaching, and researching in the field of personality psychology.

### References

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*(More on next pages)*

# Heritage Has Value

*by Robert Hogan*

Mark Leary's essay in the last issue inspired the following response in defense of "traditional" personality psychology.

First, psychology has, over the years, demonstrated a remarkable talent for squandering its patrimony, and the consequence is that no one with authority in government or industry takes us seriously. Economists and historians dictate the terms of the national debate on issues that rightfully belong to psychology. For example, economists put together the educational agenda that is being pushed by the Dept of Labor, and historians are leading the public discussion about how to manage a diverse society. In both cases the answer depends on assumptions about human nature, and ideas about the nature of human nature are an essential part of our patrimony — especially in personality psychology.

Second, the articles that appear in JPSP are of interest primarily to other people who publish in JPSP. They are a fraction of the membership of Division 8 and a teeny fraction of the the smart people in American society. Moreover, the articles that appear in JPSP are written more to advance someone's career than they are to advance our knowledge of human nature. Thus, by directing students' attention to recent issues of JPSP, they will learn little about our true patrimony.

Third, as the recent cover article on *Time* magazine indicates, Freud is, and will remain, news for the educated public. Consider Freud for a moment; he is the only person who has anything interesting to say about prejudice, and that immediately brings our attention to Bosnia, Rwanda, Northern

Ireland, etc. Jung is the only person who has something interesting to say about the recent events in Waco, Texas. Adler invented the notion of self-handicapping as a way of understanding how people deal with deficient self-esteem. Karen Horney is essential for understanding the psychology of women. Then think of Erik Erikson and the recent lamentations of V.S. Naipaul.

My guess is that the primary problem with current theories texts is that they simply aren't very good, because they don't establish the relevance and enduring legitimacy of the ideas. And that is so primarily because they take Hall and Lindzey as their model. As you know, the textbook publishing industry won't allow for much deviation — hence the long series of Hall and Lindzey clones of a book that was only okay at the outset.

I would like to suggest that each of the major theories of personality began as a topic, an effort to understand a single problem. For Freud, the problem was individual differences in relations to authority, for Jung the problem was the role of religious belief in mental health, for Adler the problem was how people deal with their feelings of inadequacy, and so on. It was only later that their musings were expanded into full-blown and not very adequate theories.

It seems to me that the question today is, to what degree has the analysis of reactions to authority advanced significantly since Freud, and so on for the rest of them. In a surprising number of cases, the analysis hasn't gone very far — take prejudice or religion as examples. More importantly, what we see in JPSP is people reinventing the wheel — most famously, perhaps, Leon Festinger rediscovering Anna Freud's defense mechanism of undoing — because they aren't very well grounded in the history of their own discipline.

# Applying Theories

*by Robert J. Wheeler*

The Spring 1994 issue of *Dialogue* contained an interesting and important article by Mark Leary entitled "How should we teach undergraduates about personality?" That article bears on the role of personality psychology, an issue summarized last summer at the annual APA meeting in a symposium chaired by Kenneth Craik. Major personality psychologists voiced concern at that time about the dwindling relevance of personality theory courses and of personality as an academic field.

Personality is typically taught at both the undergraduate and graduate levels as a theory course based on history and emphasizing comparisons of conflicting theories. This not only seems of relatively little importance to most students, but it fails to reflect the current activities in personality psychology and derogates the field as a whole. By stimulating the non-paradigmatic prescientific aspects of psychology, personality is losing its role as the integrator of psychological information and proponent of the scientific view of human nature. Academic advisors and students tend to see the typical personality course as having little applied value and to be taken only as a requirement.

The time has come for the teaching of personality to be reorganized to reflect the role of personality psychology as the foundation upon which applied fields are built. Experience in critical analysis of conflicting theories is academically valuable, however an introductory or only course in personality would better use the time to survey scientific information about human characteristics that have demonstrated usefulness and validity for health, well-being,

and performance. This would be an approach that is functional rather than theoretical or topical.

I have used this approach and found it worked well for an undergraduate personality theory course, and for a human factors course for student pilots. It started with the question "What is personality and what are the human characteristics important for health, well-being, and performance?" The theories started by Allport, Cattell, Eysenck, Murray, and Costa and McCrae were presented with a comprehensive survey of habits, traits, types, and attitudes currently in use. Then the question was asked, "How does personality work and what influences it?" The second section of the course concerned the physiological influences: psychobiology. The third concerned unconscious influences and the "divided self" which involve Freud and the psychodynamic theories. The fourth concerned environmental influences involving learning theories. And the final section concerned cognitive influences including expectancy, existential, personal construct, and actualization theories. By using the time to focus on the portions of theories that have been supported scientifically or demonstrated usefulness, the students left the course with a picture of human nature as being complex and requiring different approaches for different aspects. The emphasis was on synthesis and unification of theories rather than separation and conflict.

Most psychologists now agree that human behavior and cognition are complex, sophisticated, complicated, diverse, situational, and interactional. But most recent personality textbooks disparage synthesis and eclecticism as discouraging competitive advancement or encouraging a lukewarm ambivalence. Patterns are emerging from the prolific, rich, and scattered findings of empirical research that have the potential of providing a

scientifically based explanation of human nature. By emphasizing the situational complementarity of various "sub-theories," personality psychology could help fill the philosophical vacuum that is of concern in our society.

## A Collage of Self-Discovery

*by Randall E. Osborne*

As a college educator who teaches courses in both personality and social psychology I have found myself faced with the dilemma of helping students to understand the development of their own personality as well as the development of individual differences within others. Many colleagues have asked me, "How do we help students to experience their own personality without giving them a battery of personality tests?" The answer, it seems, is to aid them in discovering exactly who they think they are. In a related area, it is also useful to help students to appreciate that there may be a large difference between how they see themselves and how others view them. But why would such an exercise be beneficial?

First, I think it is crucial that students be allowed to explore who they are. Anyone who has ever taught the personality psychology class knows that student questions often attempt to bring the material back to understanding themselves better. Whether we teach the personality psychology course as a theories course or as a personality psychology course (as Mark Leary suggested last issue), students will question who they are as they learn more about this thing called

personality and all the things that come together to mold and shape the person. If students are engaging in this kind of self-analysis regardless of how we teach the course, it would be helpful for us to give them some guidance in doing so.

Second, students often work from the assumption that "what you see is what you get." The cliché I mention is meant to illustrate the students' assumption that everyone sees them exactly as they see themselves. The fact that others see us differently than we see ourselves can be a humbling experience. But it can be a profound learning experience as well. The fact that we are not perceived exactly as we had hoped, intended, or feared, can teach us a lot about our values and beliefs about who we are. This point also illustrates the importance of "subjective reality." The concept of subjective reality is based on the fact that individuals see their own unique version of reality. If an individual looks at a door and yells "Mom!" and then runs to hug the door, it does him little good for me to challenge his assumption that the door is his mother. Instead, I should be asking myself why he has come to view the door this way. Only if I put aside my own subjective view of reality will I truly be in a position to understand or appreciate how others come to be the unique persons that they are.

In order to aid students in such a learning experience, I suggest using a personality collage. With such a technique, students are asked to take newspaper and magazine photos, comic strips, cartoons, advertisements, headlines and such and make a collage that shows the world who they are. Students are instructed to make a collage that reflects who they are on the inside, not just how they look. A second part of the assignment involves students asking someone who they think "knows them quite well" to make a collage of the student's personality. In a short paper (3-5

pages) students are instructed to reflect on the collages and address 7 questions: What are the major themes of self depicted in your collage? What are the major similarities between the two collages? What are the major differences between how you see yourself and how the partner views you? How did these differences make you feel? Would you want to eliminate these differences, and, if so, what would you do to eliminate them? What did these differences teach you about the other person that you didn't already know? What did these differences teach you about yourself that you didn't already know?

Finally, students are told that their collages will be given a certain number of points just for being completed. After all, I tell them, how can I grade the quality of how you depict your own personality? The paper, then, is graded for quality, complexity, and such. In the end, students often incorporate many of the theories and principles covered in the personality course within their papers. In this fashion, students are allowed to experience their own personalities and discover the importance of subjective reality and other important concepts from the course. Perhaps as Mark Leary suggested, then, we can find ways such as this to integrate an understanding of personality theories into the personality psychology course that also involves the student as an active participant in his or her own learning.

## Editorial

Over the years we have edited *Dialogue*, the greatest volume of responses has come in response to columns about teaching, and the present batch of comments on Leary's column is no exception. It is clear that issues of teaching are extremely important to the membership of SPSP and that they are not adequately discussed in other forums. In that connection, we are heartened to see that the new journal (*PSPR*) has taken, as one of its missions, the providing of a valuable resource for lecturers.

We cannot resist adding our own thoughts to the debate on how best to teach personality, having spent several years teaching it ourselves and exploring several alternatives. The conclusion we reached about the ideal plan differs from all existing textbooks, unfortunately, but it combines key features raised in Leary's column and the commentaries.

To be precise, we think that a first course in personality psychology should begin with an extended, detailed coverage of Freud and then should leap to the present and cover current research, with some discussion of applications. Clearly this plan is unsightly, in that it begins with one man's theory and then spends the rest of the semester working by topics. Several reasons speak in favor of this plan, however.

In the first place, Freud still represents the point of departure for much current research (and, not incidentally, much clinical

work). Moreover, Freud's influence extends beyond psychology itself. Freud is probably the only psychologist whom nonpsychologists expect to know and discuss, and the only one about whom it can be said that an undergraduate education is deficient if his work was omitted.

We also think that exploring Freud in depth and detail is worth more than a superficial treatment of a half dozen theories. Jung, Adler, Erikson, and the rest do have ample merit, of course, but they do not need to be covered in a first course in personality, whereas Freud does. (Actually, we do like to follow Freud with a quick tour of Sullivan, as a contrast and as a transition.) To appreciate Freud's thought, including individual dynamics, social theory, and critical reassessment, takes several weeks and offers the student a valuable foundation. Some genuine understanding, rather than a superficial list of terms, can be reached in that time.

Apart from Freud, however, we agree with Leary and several of the commentators that it is important to teach students what the field of personality encompasses today: individual differences, personality processes, and assessment, along with the debates such as over situationism, the Big Five, and personality change. Covering current research gives students a useful insight into what the field has to offer and should provide some basis for applying research findings to social problems, practical dilemmas, and self-knowledge.

Presenting current research also helps students understand the change in the way the field is approached. A pure theories course leaves many students with the impression that the field of personality is constructed by spinning introspection and personal opinions into grand theories of human nature. The discipline of having to prove one's points is itself a useful lesson.

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