Encyclopedia of Leadership

George R. Goethals
Williams College

Georgia J. Sorenson
University of Maryland, University of Richmond

James MacGregor Burns
Williams College

General Editor
General Editor
Senior Editor

A Berkshire Reference Work

A SAGE Reference Publication

SAGE Publications
International Educational and Professional Publisher
Thousand Oaks • London • New Delhi
PERSONALITY AND GROUP ROLES

One way that leaders shape the organizational, societal, or political climate of their group is through their style of communication and interaction with other group members. The effectiveness of leaders has been determined by analyzing both the dispositional qualities of leaders and the situational factors that contribute to the creation of a great leader. The tendency of most research is to underestimate the extent to which specific situations promote evaluations of exceptional leadership. Instead, much of the research focuses on what is often termed the “great person” approach, that is, analyzing whether successful leaders share any personality characteristics. Therefore, any discussion of leadership warrants a discussion of personality.

Generally, personality refers to a person’s consistent temperament and interaction style, but not always. While personality is generally discussed in terms of traits (stable predispositions in behavior) there is a growing literature that discusses people’s motives (contextual drives) in relation to personality. Although the history of personality assessment focuses on fixed traits, in order to describe and explain human personality accurately, it is necessary to include a discussion of situational motives for behavior also.

Why is the discussion of personality motives as important as traits? Personality research reveals that although “great” leaders share similar personal characteristics, the findings are not as powerful as the great person approach might lead one to suspect. Leaders have been found to be more intelligent, more outgoing, and more dominant than followers, but the situation the leader confronts seems to be as important as his or her personal characteristics. Favorable situations for leadership occur when the leader has
considerable authority and a clear-cut task while simultaneously being situated in contexts where group members communicate well both with one another and with the leader.

Leaders are assigned a particular role in groups based on the formality of the situation. Formal leadership roles (for example, CEO of a corporation) are often designated prior to any group interaction. Therefore, persons in formal leadership positions systematically maintain power and status despite fluctuations in situational demands. Situational demands are more significant for small, leaderless groups convening in more informal settings. It is in these settings that individual personality characteristics can play a role in whether certain people emerge as the group leader. People may bid for the leadership role based on whether or not they were previously group leader, or group members may assign the leadership role to a person exhibiting personality characteristics, such as flexibility or fairness, deemed suitable for an informal leader who must adapt to the ever-changing climate of small-group decision making.

EARLY PERSONALITY RESEARCH

Psychologists are not the only ones to look at the puzzle of personality; in fact, personality differences have interested people across time. Both ancient philosophers and modern-day psychologists have attempted to formalize their conjectures into reliable and comprehensive systems predicting human behavior. Perhaps the earliest personality psychologists in the West were ancient Greek physicians such as Hippocrates and Galen, who distinguished between four different types of temperament. They linked these temperaments to the four elements—air, earth, fire, and water—and saw different fluids within the body as representative of the various temperaments. As science progressed, so did personality theories.

It was in 1930s that personality psychology defined itself as a separate field. At that time the psychologist Gordon Allport published his landmark text *Personality: A Psychological Interpretation*. Allport distinguished between levels of personality traits (that is, between surface characteristics and core personality tendencies) in attempting to explain variations in personality.

Following in Allport’s tradition, early personality theorists attempted to generate a taxonomy of personality based on adjectives describing human behavior. One of the first personality theories, Raymond Cattell’s sixteen-factor theory (1950), focused on clusters of sixteen adjectives describing general surface characteristics. Believing that Cattell’s theory was overly complex, later researchers pared down the taxonomy to as few as three to five traits. For example, in 1952, Hans Eysenck developed a three-factor theory that focused on paired oppositional central traits (for example, introversion and extroversion) and was similar in ways to the ancient four-factor model of Hippocrates and Galen.

Prompted by Walter Mischel in the late 1960s, researchers began to question the view of personality as a collection of inherent and stable traits. A new theoretical structure emerged that focused on situations as the determinants of behavior. A classic example of how situations can determine personality is the Stanford Prison Experiment. In 1971, Philip Zimbardo and his colleagues constructed a mock prison environment and arbitrarily assigned research participants to be either guards or inmates. What happened was astonishing. In a matter of days the guards assumed a sadistic, authoritarian demeanor, while the inmates succumbed to anger and depression. Although planned as a two-week experiment, it was cancelled after only 6 days. The prison experiment clearly illustrates the power that situational forces can have on one’s disposition.

CONTEMPORARY PERSONALITY RESEARCH

In the 1960s and 1970s, the field of personality shifted its focus from research on discrete and unchanging personality types to incorporate perspectives that acknowledged the influence of culture and environment upon the individual. This development was achieved in part by focusing more prominently on personality in terms of group roles.

One result of this shift was socioanalytic theory, which integrates themes of psychoanalysis, sociological role theory, and evolutionary psychology.
Socioanalytic theory argues that people have come to survive more efficiently by living in small, hierarchical groups, and that within these groups, they seek fulfillment of two main goals, acceptance and status. In addition, socioanalytic research suggests that people’s behaviors are influenced by the necessity to manage one’s reputation in the service of these goals, which ultimately are rooted in the desire for reproductive success.

Another current area of research is known as social cognitive theory. It provides a sophisticated discussion of the integration of research on personality and group roles. The social cognitive approach to personality emphasizes the importance of cognitive processes in determining personality and behavior patterns. Sociocognitive theorists are interested in how a person’s expectations, goals, and feelings of competence determine personality and behavior. Following in the tradition of Mischel, the social element of sociocognitive theory links person to environmental context.

From the late 1980s, personality research has increasingly relied on these interactionist perspectives. Although there is still a substantial reliance on trait taxonomies, the interactionist framework can be applied specifically to the study of groups and the individual roles that exist within them. One of the most well-known taxonomies, referred to as the “Big Five,” considers personality as a confluence of five traits: extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness to experience, and neuroticism. Researchers often use the Big Five taxonomy to study how a particular trait functions within a specific group role. Although the Big Five model is sometimes criticized for its neglect of social and cultural influences, it has achieved wide recognition because of its cross-cultural applicability and similarity to the early personality models.

TWO APPROACHES TO STUDYING PERSONALITY IN GROUPS

Research on personality and group roles has led to examination of the ways that individuals operate within the social realm. There are two distinct approaches to studying personality in terms of group roles. One approach examines whether certain personality types (for example, the extrovert) are suitable for certain group roles. The second approach examines how one’s role in a group affects how others perceive one’s personality.

Relation of Personality Types to Group Role

Psychologists have examined the relationship between individual personality and relationships within groups in three main ways—through an examination of the distinction between authoritarian and authoritative personality traits, through exploration of the Type A personality, and through examination of the bimodal types described in the Big Five taxonomy for particular group roles.

Authoritarian Personality Types

Research on the authoritarian personality began in 1941, when Erich Fromm composed the California F (F standing for fascist) scale to describe characteristics of the authoritarian personality. Later researchers refined descriptions of the authoritarian personality. With the authoritative personality at the opposite end of the spectrum, authoritarian personality types are described as having a behavioral tendency toward dominance and leadership, a preoccupation with achievement, and a tendency toward interpersonal conflict and verbal hostility. These personality characteristics drive authoritarian individuals to seek the leadership position within a group. Authoritarian personality types tend to be ethnocentric and to find self-esteem through loyalty to a cohesive “in-group.” These types tend to seek membership in groups in which their personality characteristics are either prototypical or sought after, which results in their gaining power.

Type A Personality

Although research on the Type A personality was originally conducted to examine the increased risk of coronary heart disease incurred by people with that personality type, this line of research is also relevant for studies of organizational behavior. The Type A personality is described as being extremely competitive, achievement oriented, hostile, aggressive, and as exhibiting a sense of urgency through the use of...
Personality and Group Roles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common Big Five Label</th>
<th>Common descriptions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extroversion (vs. Introversion)</td>
<td>gregarious, assertive, outgoing, energetic, dominant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreeableness (vs. Antagonism)</td>
<td>trustworthy, straightforward, compliant, modest, appreciative, generous, cooperative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscientiousness (vs. Lack of Direction)</td>
<td>competent, orderly, dutiful, achievement-oriented, self-disciplined, organized, efficient, responsible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neuroticism (vs. Emotional Stability)</td>
<td>anxious, self-conscious, impulsive, temperamental, tense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness (vs. Closedness) to Experience</td>
<td>active, feeling, imaginative, clever, ingenious, intelligent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

emphatic speech and certain psychomotor mannerisms. People with Type A personalities tend to be inclined to seek out highly active and competitive roles within a group setting (for example, they may choose to be stock brokers or corporate managers). People with Type A personalities tend to experience stress when lacking mental stimulation or physical activity. To relieve this stress and to construct a constant state of stimulation, they may attempt to elicit competitive reactions from others.

The Big Five Taxonomy

While often cited as more of a research taxonomy than an organizational tool, nonetheless an abun-
dance of research has been conducted on the Big Five personality traits within organizational or group settings. Of the five major personality traits, extroversion is the one most pertinent to leadership roles. Similar to the Type A personality, extroverted people tend to seek out situations of high activity and a great deal of interpersonal interaction. The core characteristics of extroverts (outgoingness, assertiveness) emerge during interpersonal interactions and group relationships. Dan McAdams describes extroverts involved in leaderless, task-oriented groups as more likely to initiate and engage in conversation and more often chosen for leadership roles by the other group members. It is not surprising that extroverted personality types are often successful in sales, management, and other leadership positions.

Other Big Five personality traits have also been correlated with predictable ways in which individuals interact in group settings. For example, conscientiousness has emerged as an indicator of competence and strong job performance. People who score high on openness tend to change careers more often in adulthood and perform better in job training programs. These trait-by-situation interactions may help researchers develop a nuanced understanding of the ways in which core personality traits relate to performance in various environments.

Effect of One’s Role in the Group on Outward Manifestations of Personality

The structure of an organization often determines the roles played by its various members. For that reason, another line of personality research examines the group dynamic as the determining force in the outward manifestation of personality. It suggests that one’s placement within a group contributes to one’s attitude and subsequent behavior. The scholar Rosabeth Kanter has delineated three structural factors: opportunity, proportion, and power, which work to determine an individual’s role within a group structure.

Opportunity refers to one’s possibility for mobility and growth within a particular group. People high in opportunity have the potential to rise upward through the organizational ranks of a group. Upward
mobility is marked by an increase in personal status and facilitates access to the group's limited resources. People who find themselves in positions that offer a good amount of opportunity may adopt attitudes of competitiveness, openness to learning, and commitment to the group. In other words, one's level of opportunity affects the expression of core personality traits, and to observers also implies possession of a particular personality.

Proportion is the ratio of different types of people within a group—for example, between a minority group and the majority group—and the relationships among those types. The dynamic created by skewed group ratios has a powerful influence on an individual's personality within the group setting. Those who find themselves in a minority or token position often experience considerable pressure to conform to the stereotype that the majority, or dominant group, has created. Kanter describes role encapsulation, a process through which minorities are encouraged to limit shows of competence and resist challenging prevailing norms. Many people respond to such pressures with conservative behaviors, which might inhibit their upward mobility within the group. In such a case, one can imagine how a person who was rated as a stable personality type might be perceived as neurotic (or unstable) when put in the position of a token.

Finally, power is an obvious determinant of behavior within a group structure. People possessing more power have greater access to resources, perform less-routine tasks, and are perceived as more important to the group. Power can influence personality in a variety of ways. It can have a negative effect (for example, leading a person to become condescending, paternalistic, or overly controlling), but can also lead to feelings of security and high self-esteem.

PERSONALITY ASSESSMENT IN ORGANIZATIONAL SETTINGS

Of the different approaches to leadership, the trait perspective or personality approach is most commonly associated with determining one's advancement within an organization. Personality measures have been widely used in the selection and development of employees, although their use has waned since the 1960s and 1970s when it was asserted that personality measures are not always predictive of employee success.

The Myers-Briggs type indicator (MBTI) is the most widely used personality assessment tool in North American society. According to the Center for the Applications of Psychological Type, the company that holds rights to the MBTI, it is administered to nearly 2 million people in the United States each year. Since 1975, the instrument has been used by many organizations searching for the best candidates for advancement or admission.

The MBTI groups people into sixteen different personality types along four bipolar dimensions: extroversion-introversion, sensation-intuition, thinking-feeling, and judging-perceiving. A person arrives at his or her type by translating his or her score on the questionnaire into one of the sixteen types describing their "conscious orientation." For example, a person scoring high on extroversion, intuition, thinking, and judging (ENTJ) would be described as "assertive, outspoken, and driven to lead." Persons scored as ISTJ, ISFJ, ESFP, and ESFJ are described as cooperative and loyal group members, while persons scored as INTJ, ENFJ, and ENTJ are described as excellent leaders.

Although research often describes certain personalities as being more successful in the leader or follower role, some researchers assert that each job probably requires a mix of different traits specific to that particular job. Therefore, it is better for organizations to compile a composite of traits optimal for each job rather than relying on generalized descriptions of what makes a great leader.

It has been argued that leadership should not be determined exclusively on the basis of productive outcomes, but group processes as well. If leadership was contingent upon outcomes alone, personality might be a suitable measure of leadership potential. But leaders also strive to demonstrate competence, accept accountability for their actions, and satisfy other group members' expectations within group interactions. In fact, in his description of three general leadership styles (autocratic, which is task oriented; democratic, which is both task oriented and
socially focused; and laissez-faire, which offers little direction). Kurt Lewin determined that a democratic leadership style procured the most successful results in terms of both task accomplishment and group member satisfaction.

NEW DIRECTIONS

Contemporary personality research acknowledges that people’s personalities are multifaceted, richly contextualized, and not reducible to a few static descriptive categories. The research to date highlights the importance of the ongoing interaction between personality traits and the context in which they are expressed. Group communication is a bidirectional, dynamic process: An individual’s personality both affects and is affected by the group.

How can organizations and leaders learn from personality research? It is important to note that people sometimes vary in personality typology across different personality instruments and across time and context. If organizations and institutions use personality tests in their search for the best job candidate or leader, the dynamic aspect of personality should also be taken into consideration. Universal personality measures have yet to capture the context-specific nature of personality, so organizations will benefit from using a variety of criteria to assess leadership potential. If organizations seek the best leader for the specific task rather than clinging to assumptions that people with particular traits always make the best leaders, they are likely to experience improved productivity, satisfaction, and group commitment.

—Jamie L. Franco and Greg Reaume

See also Group Cohesiveness; Group Norms; Group Process; Groupthink

Further Reading


