PERSONALITY TRAITS

The most central concept in personality psychology is the trait, which can be defined as a relatively stable predisposition to behave in a certain way. Traits are considered to be part of the person, not part of the environment. People carry their traits with them from one environment to another, although the actual manifestation of a trait in the form of behaviour usually requires some perceived cue or trigger in the environment. For example, the trait of aggressiveness might be defined as an inner disposition to argue or fight. That predisposition is presumed to stay with the person in all environments, but actual arguing or fighting is unlikely to occur unless the person perceives provocations in the environment. Aggressiveness or kindness or any other personality trait is, in that sense, analogous to the physical trait of "meltability" in margarine. Margarine melts only when subjected to heat (a characteristic of the environment); but some brands need less heat to melt than others do, and that difference lies in the margarine, not in the environment.

It is useful to distinguish traits from states. States of motivation and emotion are, like traits, defined as inner entities that can be inferred from observed behaviour. But

while traits are enduring, states are temporary. In fact, a trait might be defined as an enduring attribute that describes one's likelihood of entering temporally into a particular state. The personality trait of aggressiveness describes the likelihood that a person will enter a hostile state, much as the physical trait of meltability describes the likelihood that a brand of margarine will enter a liquid state.

Traits are not characteristics that people have or lack in all-or-none fashion but, rather, are dimensions (continuous, measurable characteristics) along which people differ by degree. If we measure aggressiveness or any other trait in a large number of people, our results would approximate a normal distribution, in which the majority of people are near the middle of the range and few are at the extremes.

Traits describe how people differ from others on particular dimensions, but they are not themselves explanations of those differences. To say that a person is high in aggressiveness simply means that the person tends to argue or fight a lot, in situations that would not provoke such behaviour in most people. The trait is inferred from the behaviour. It would be meaningless, then, for one to say that Harry argues and fights a lot because he is highly

aggressive. That would be essentially the same as saying, "Harry argues and fights a lot because he argues and fights a lot."