1-1-2005

How to Teach the Introductory Psychology Unit on Personality Psychology: Using the Systems Framework

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How to Teach the Introductory Psychology Unit on Personality Psychology

...Using the Systems Framework

by John D. Mayer
The Step-by-Step Approach:

1. What The Personality Chapter in the Introductory Psychology Book *Should* Do
2. What the Personality Chapter in the Introductory Psychology Book *Actually Looks Like*
3. How to Fix It
1. What the Personality Chapter in the Introductory Psychology Book Should Do
Wundt’s Conception of Personality

- Personality is a system
- A system is a set of interrelated parts. Examples are:
  - The solar system
  - A college or university
- Subfields are organized from those studying smaller units to those studying larger units.
- Personality was the large system that organized the parts of psychology
Wundt’s Vision for Personality

(updated a bit)
Most Introductory Psychology Books Proceed from Smaller to Larger Systems

- The Neuron
- Sensation
- Perception
- Memory
- Motivation
- Emotion
- Intelligence
- Personality
Introductory Psychology books have an “institutional memory” of what Wundt envisioned: That personality would integrate what had come before (and transition to the study of people in groups).

That is why they usually place personality at the end of the section on parts of the person, just before the chapter on social psychology, or a series of chapters on applications of psychology.
2. What the Personality Chapter in the Introductory Psychology Book Actually Looks Like
Does Your Introductory Psychology Textbook’s Chapter Look Like This?

► Psychodynamic:
  ▪ Freud: Conscious/Unc; Id Ego, Superego

► Trait Theorists:
  ▪ Allport’s traits
  ▪ Eysenck’s Big Three
  ▪ Costa & McCrae & Goldberg’s The Big Five

► Humanism
  ▪ Maslow’s Need Hierarchy

► Social Learning:
  ▪ Rotter’s expectancy theory
  ▪ Mischel’s behavioral expression
  ▪ Bandura’s self-efficacy
Just When You Wanted To Pull It All Together...

- The personality section adds *more* fragmentation
- Many theories
- All contradictory
- Contradictions within theoretical perspectives
- Much of it is historical and lacks evidence – but the textbook author doesn’t necessarily say so for risk of offending professors who love the old perspectives (as do I – but I’m not offended by change)
3. How To Fix It
Most Introductory Psychology Textbooks Provide all The Coverage You Need

► Your introductory psychology book has adequate coverage of personality psychology.
► It is just organized in a fragmented way
► It likely goes perspective-by-perspective (although a few use other organizations)
There are better organizations

The Systems Framework for Personality (Mayer, 1998) is an Outline with Four Topics

1. What is personality: It is the organization of the major psychological subsystems we have studied thus far
2. What are personality’s parts: They are motives, emotions, cognition...as we have studied thus far
3. What is personality’s organization?
   1. Structure: The Big Five; Conscious/unconscious
   2. Dynamics: Mental Defense
4. Development (or leave until the Development chapter)
Or, In a Bit More Detail...

► What Is Personality?
  ▶ Define personality as a system

► Personality’s Parts
  ▶ We have already examined many of personality’s parts throughout this semester.
    ▶ Attachment; object relations
    ▶ Memory = Autobiographical memory
    ▶ Emotions = A person’s emotional style
    ▶ Motives = A person’s motives

► Personality Organization
  ▶ Structural Trait Organizations
    ▶ The Big Three (Eysenck)
    ▶ The Big Five (Costa, McCrae, Goldberg, etc.)
  ▶ Global Structural organization:
    ▶ Conscious-unconscious
    ▶ e.g., Freud: Conscious/Unc; Id Ego, Superego
    ▶ But there are newer, better organizations (e.g., the Systems Set)

► Personality Organization (continued)
  ▶ Dynamics of Action
    ▶ Mischel’s interactionism
    ▶ Rotter’s expectancy
    ▶ Bandura’s self-efficacy
  ▶ Dynamics: Self Control
    ▶ Freud (and others): Defense and coping

► Personality Development
  ▶ You may want to postpone this to the Development chapter, but if not:
    ▶ Erikson’s stages
    ▶ Maslow’s concept of self-actualization

► Now you can tell your own story about the whole personality...

► Then say, “In the Next Chapter, We’ll Move up a Level of Analysis, and Discuss People in Groups: Social Psychology”
Or use the systems framework lecture reorganizer...

See:
Conclusions

► The Introductory Psychology book typically places “Personality” at the conclusion of many chapters on major psychological subsystems.
► In this sense, they are “remembering” Wundt’s idea that personality should draw the field together.
► Most Introductory Psychology books provide the coverage you need to teach personality in a systems manner.
► It’s (almost) as simple as re-ordering your lectures.
Further Readings

Overview of the systems framework:

Extensions Relevant for Introductory Psychology:

A personality textbook based on the system: