

What is "personality"?

There is hardly anything that is as central to anyone's life as "personality", which is unique and distinctive for every individual. But what is it that we call "personality"? And why are there so many different definitions? These questions were explored by Jana Uher. In a comprehensive trilogy of research papers, she has investigated the meta-theories – the "theories behind the theories" – that scientists have developed about individuals and "personality". This metatheoretical perspective sheds new light on the many existing definitions of "personality" and unravels the commonalities and differences between them.



What is "personality"? Everyone has an opinion about this because "personality" is primarily an important concept of everyday psychology that we use to differentiate individuals from one another and to make them distinguishable for us. Every adult person possesses a comprehensive everyday knowledge about how the members of his or her specific social, cultural and language community explain and categorise the things of the world.

Acquiring this knowledge already begins with language acquisition because language is used to communicate and to capture information and knowledge. Therefore, every word contains various meanings, which are sometimes more and sometimes less obvious because words and meanings can also change over time.

For research on "personality", this is both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, all researchers can resort to their comprehensive everyday knowledge about individuals without having to start from scratch. This knowledge has been developed in their particular socio-cultural and language communities on the basis of the experiences and ideas of previous generations and has proven to be useful for handling the issues of everyday social life.

Our everyday language contains many words that we can use to communicate complex information about individuals efficiently and quickly. We use the small piece of information that somebody is "grumpy" to draw conclusions about an individual whom we have not yet met, and we align our actions accordingly. This is possible because our everyday knowledge contains a differentiated system of socio-cognitive categories that are expressed in our everyday words, directly or indirectly (see the Science Blog "Human's 'personality glasses' - Why we form impressions of individuals. New insights into a uniquely human ability").

But on the other hand, this everyday knowledge and everyday vocabulary entail a number of profound problems for "personality" research, as Jana Uher has shown in her new paradigm for research on individuals that is applicable across various scientific disciplines (see the Science Blog "A new scientific paradigm for research on individuals"). Such problems occur because scientists cannot simply ignore the words and meanings of everyday psychology. She emphasises that they are an important part of every person's language and thinking.

Moreover, all scientists have personal ideas and beliefs about what is meant by the term "personality", and these ideas and beliefs are based on the scientists' own social, cultural and language background. Scientists exploring individuals are always individuals themselves with their own personal viewpoints and ideas about the world. Therefore, they are not independent from their objects of research – in contrast to, for example, physicists and chemists. No wonder that, by 1937, scientists had already set up more than 50 different definitions of "personality"!

Quantum physicists have such an easy time compared with this! They can work on their topics unburdened by everyday knowledge, and they do not have to consider a range of existing meanings of words. Instead, they are free to develop completely new terms and their own scientific language. The words of our everyday languages, many of which are often imprecise and sometimes also contradictory, constitute a real dilemma for research on individuals and their "personality". But many researchers are often not very aware of this, as Jana Uher has critically ascertained in her new trilogy of research papers.

Most likely as a consequence of this, previous research on human "personality" is largely based on the person-descriptive words of our everyday language, in particular on adjectives such as gregarious, anxious, curious, cool, brave or aggressive. Such words are used in "personality" questionnaires to assess individuals. However, questionnaires can explore at best what humans think about themselves or other individuals. But questionnaires cannot measure how the assessed individuals actually behave.

Therefore, Jana Uher differentiates language from the different kinds of phenomena that are being denoted. Language is not the same as behaviour. Language is also different from an individual's body build, physiology and psyche and the outer parts of appearance that individuals can change themselves, such as through clothing, jewellery, hairstyle or tattoos.

"Many researchers overlook a fallacy that derives from our everyday thinking for we often believe that our words are directly related to the things that they denote. But this is possible only for concrete things that we can directly perceive, such as a table, a tree or the face of a person. But this is not possible for words that refer to abstract things or to things that we have only conceived because these things do not tangibly exist in physical reality in the ways in which we think of them", says the scientist. This also applies to "personality".

So what then is "personality"? Jana Uher finds the common scientific definitions of "personality" as "individual characteristics" or "unique peculiarities" surprisingly vague. In particular, she has criticised that it is not clear what is to be considered "individually characteristic", "unique" or "peculiar" and why.

In her research, the scientist has shown that all definitions of "personality" basically denote something that is specific to an individual. She emphasises that "Individual-specific can only be what differs between individuals because anything that all individuals show in similar ways cannot be specific to a single individual. Moreover, these individual differences must not be simply random but must occur repeatedly in similar ways". Thus, the concept of "personality" denotes patterns in the occurrences of events – such as bodily features or behaviours – that vary between individuals in ways that are relatively stable at least across some period of time.

The phenomena that are externally observable in individuals and that do not change or that change only slowly over time, such as eye colour or body size, allow for direct comparisons between individuals, at least when the individuals are next to each other. Then it becomes quickly apparent, for example, who is taller than others or who has the longer hair.

But when the observable events change quickly from one moment to the next – as is the case with behaviour – then individuals cannot be directly compared. In everyday life, it is rare that several individuals will show exactly the same behaviour at the same moment in time – as is the case in foot races in which we can directly compare individuals' behaviours, such as to see who runs faster than others.

For this reason, only through repeated observation and measurement is it possible to figure out who shows what kind of behaviour on average more frequently than others; for example, who is more physically active than others in everyday life. Usually, this cannot be seen directly. One can find out by applying technical means, such as step counters, which record individuals' activities over some amount of time. The same applies for many physiological phenomena. Heart beat, blood sugar and cortisol – all this can change rather quickly, and there are tremendous fluctuations within each individual both over the course of a single day and across several days.

These fluctuations are often much larger than the differences that occur between individuals' average scores. This often makes it quite difficult to find individual differences that again occur in similar ways at some later point in time. Thus, it is often quite challenging to identify what is specific to an individual. Therefore, more complex methods are required in research on "personality" than in other fields of research. "In particular, it becomes apparent that 'personality' cannot be directly observed at any given moment, as we can directly perceive a behavioural act or the hair colour of a given individual", says Jana Uher.

In research on psychical phenomena, such as on individuals' thoughts and feelings, this is particularly challenging because we can perceive experiences only in ourselves but not in anybody else. Direct comparisons between individuals are therefore not possible.

In her trilogy, Jana Uher has shown that all psychological definitions of "personality" refer to what is specific to an individual. This also becomes apparent in the analytical methods that psychologists use in their studies. "But there are very different opinions about the particular kinds of phenomena in which individual-specificity is regarded as 'personality'", she asserts.

Many "personality" psychologists focus on the psyche. Others understand "personality" as individual-specificity in experience and behaviour. Some also include psycho-physiology. Still others consider also the physique as forming part of an individual's "personality", whereas many psychologists strictly reject this idea. A different group of psychologists understands "personality" as a cultural phenomenon, as something that is ascribed to individuals by their social community and that is therefore socially created.

Behind these different concepts are very different assumptions. "These basic assumptions must be explored in more detail", says Jana Uher, "otherwise, researchers are talking at cross-purposes". Rather than excluding particular domains from the outset, she defines "personality" in her new paradigm as individual-specificity in all kinds of phenomena that are explored in individuals: thus, not only in language and in what people think about individuals, but also in individuals' physique, behaviour and psyche, personal surroundings and in the aspects of outer appearance that individuals can change themselves. Only when all kinds of phenomena are studied in equal measure can their interrelations be explored systematically.

The big models of human "personality" that are widely used today, such as the Big Five and the Five Factor Model, were all developed on the basis of everyday language and everyday knowledge. But there is still no "personality" model that has been developed, for example, on the basis of human behaviour. It is high time that individuals are systematically explored with regard to all the different kinds of phenomena and from the professional perspectives of different disciplines – rather than only from the particular viewpoint of everyday psychology.

Scientific publications:

- Uher, J. (2015a). Conceiving "personality": Psychologists' challenges and basic fundamentals of the Transdisciplinary Philosophy-of-Science Paradigm for Research on Individuals. *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science*, 49, 398-458. [[Download](#)] [DOI: 10.1007/s12124-014-9283-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/s12124-014-9283-1)
- Uher, J. (2015b). Developing "personality" taxonomies: Metatheoretical and methodological rationales underlying selection approaches, methods of data generation and reduction principles. *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science*, 49 (4). [[Download](#)] [DOI: 10.1007/s12124-014-9280-4](https://doi.org/10.1007/s12124-014-9280-4)
- Uher, J. (2015c). Interpreting "personality" taxonomies: Why previous models cannot capture individual-specific experiencing, behaviour, functioning and development. Major taxonomic tasks still lay ahead. *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science*, 49 (4). [[Download](#)] [DOI: 10.1007/s12124-014-9281-3](https://doi.org/10.1007/s12124-014-9281-3)

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