

# Chapter 2: Trait theories

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*Leadership: A Critical Introduction*

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# Leaders: born or made?

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- For over a century, scholars have attempted to answer the question of what characterizes a leader and sets them apart from a non-leader or an ineffective leader.
- Thomas Carlyle effectively opened the floor to the modern study of trait theory, with his conceptualization of the 'Great Men' who had shaped history, and many scholars picked up the baton in an attempt to discover 'heritable traits' that might differentiate leaders from non-leaders (Galton & Eysenck, 1869).
- The Great Man theory later became known as the trait approach as a wide range of modern-day scholars sought to conduct research into the traits that set apart great leaders from ineffectual ones.

## *The 'Great Men' of history*

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- The great myth, or legend, of the heroic, legendary figure or leader in antiquity and modern cultures appears across a myriad of temporal and cultural dimensions:
  - Philosophical (Plato, Aristotle, Socrates)
  - Religious (Jesus Christ, Mohammed, Mother Teresa)
  - Political (Barack Obama, Machiavelli, Steve Biko, Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela)
  - Military (Napoleon Bonaparte, Winston Churchill)
  - Fictional (Luke Skywalker, Beowulf)
  - Sports (Oscar Pistorius, Gilbert Tuhabonye, winners of the ancient Olympic Games)
  - Business (Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, Andrew Carnegie, Warren Buffett)
  - and all other environments

## *The trait approach: renewed interest*

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- The trait approach has recently enjoyed a renewed surge in interest, largely due to the emergence and popularity of ‘new leadership school’ theories such as charismatic and transformational leadership.
- Trait research is discussed in the following slides under three sub-headings:
  - *personality traits*
  - *neurological traits*
  - *physical traits*

## *Personality traits*

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- Stogdill's pivotal 1948 study of 124 trait studies (conducted 1904 to 1947) concluded that there could be no claims of universality of personality traits exhibited by leaders that could definitely separate them from non-leaders across a range of different situations.
- In a follow-up study conducted in 1974 (data taken from 163 studies from 1948 to 1970), Stogdill modified his claims regarding the prominence of situational factors as a key determinant of leadership, and instead posited that it was a mix of personality factors, in addition to situational factors, that constituted key determinants of leadership.
- Stogdill identified eight personality traits that differentiated leaders from non-leaders; *intelligence, alertness, insight, responsibility, initiative, persistence, self-confidence* and *sociability*.

## *Personality traits continued*

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- A subsequent 1959 study conducted by Mann compared in excess of 1,400 trait studies of leadership in small groups. Mann concluded, similarly, that specific personality traits differentiated leaders from non-leaders, with his study identifying the traits of *intelligence, masculinity, adjustment, dominance, extraversion* and *conservatism*.
- A more recent study by Lord et al. (1986) utilized a meta-analytic approach to study trait research, and also identified a range of traits – *intelligence, masculinity* and *dominance* – as key leadership traits.

## *Personality traits continued*

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### *'The Big Five'*

- Much modern research into the existence of personality traits within the study of trait theory is based on the 'Big Five' personality dimensions (Goldberg, 1981), which constitute *neuroticism, extraversion, neuroticism/emotional stability, agreeableness, conscientiousness and openness to experience*.
- Extraversion has been linked most strongly to the emergence of leadership (Judge, Bono, Ilies & Gerhardt, 2002).

## *Gender, personality and leadership*

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- The gender of the leader appears to mediate the behaviours and personality of leaders. For example, women are perceived as being more considerate of the needs of others, and in the needs of the organization, whereas males are perceived as more self-interested and power orientated. Interestingly, however, such gender differences seem to be based only on perceptions, as opposed to being based on actual observable differences (Eagly & Karua, 2002).
- This might stem from the importance attributed by followers to the leaders' physical traits, where masculinity and maturity of appearance are perceived as being more powerful.
- Attractiveness is a positive predictor of leadership success, although the relationship between success and attractiveness has interestingly been shown to be inverse in the case of females (Heilman & Stopeck, 1985).

# *Emotional intelligence, personality and leadership*

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- Many authors have already established a link between emotional intelligence and neurology (for example, Morse (2006), who suggest the articulation of a vision is affected by limbic system activity; and Paulus et al. (2003), who believe that the cortex may help to mediate regulation of risk and to affect behaviours in anticipation of emotional responses such as fear. Research also indicates that right frontal brain dysfunction predisposes an individual to poor social skills, poor emotional regulation and poor self-awareness (Salloway, Malloy & Duffy, 2001), and that frontal cortex activity affects moral judgement (Knabb, Welsh, Ziebell & Reimer, 2009).
- Emotional intelligence is also considered at far greater depth later in Chapter 8, 'Emotional intelligence'.

## *Neurological traits*

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- Turkheimer (2000, p. 160) theorizes that ‘Everything is heritable’. This statement tells us that personality, and therefore personality traits, are, to an extent, inherited.
- One might observe, for example, that intelligence, itself considered heritable to an extent, has been positively linked to effective leadership (Judge et al., 2004).
- This leads us neatly to the consideration of neurological traits – a partially heritable construct that plays its part in the ‘nature versus nurture’ debate, and which also raises the question of the necessary neurological traits that a leader must possess in order for specific personality traits and behaviours to be exhibited.

## *Neurological traits continued: brain chemistry*

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- Neuroscience identifies the role of brain chemistry in defining individual traits, behaviour and learning and, therefore, in leadership ability.
- For example, some research points to the fact that 30 per cent of the individual differences in leadership can be attributed to genetics (Arvey, Zhang, Avolio & Kruger, 2007).
- Bass and Bass (2009) recount how leadership trait research, constructs and theory only have the capacity to account for around 10 per cent of the variance in leadership outcomes.
- This has led to the recent emergence of the use of neuroscience in various fields, such as neuroeconomics (the study of the role of neuroscience in economic decision making), and in the role of neurology in risk-taking behaviour.

## *Neurological traits continued: serotonin*

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- An individual who possess a high level of serotonin is likely to moderate stress more effectively, which in turn might positively affect decision making (Cawthorn, 1996). Serotonin exerts an effect on emotional intelligence by increasing feelings of happiness and optimism, with a concomitant effect of enhancing the individual's ability to deal with stress. Emotional intelligence is considered a contributor to effective leadership (see Chapter 8, 'Emotional intelligence').
- The positive, mood-enhancing effects of serotonin emerge frequently in nutritional and sport science-related research. Gelderloos et al. (1988)\* demonstrated a positive correlation with both high scores on leadership tests and tests of work performance. Emerging research into foetal and childhood development suggests a link between the level of tryptophan (a precursor of serotonin) ingested by the mother and the mood of the child, and nutritional science points to a clear link between diet, the levels of serotonin in our bodies and the concomitant relationship that this emerges on our emotional health and feelings of well-being.

\*Gelderloos, P., Walton, K., Goddard, P., Gaudet, D. and Pugh, N. (1988), "Whole blood serotonin and 5-hydroxy-indoleacetic acid, biochemical markers of leadership ability", Proceedings of the Iowa Academy of Science, Vol. 95, p. A57.

## *Neurological traits continued: endogenous steroids (testosterone and cortisol)*

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- Endogenous steroids – testosterone and cortisol – are produced naturally by the body, and both possess cognitive and behavioural effects.
- Cortisol is known as the ‘stress hormone’, as levels of the hormone increase when we face a stressful situation (N.B. we also produce adrenaline in stressful situations). Long-term exposure to elevated cortisol levels have been shown to exert a negative effect on mood.
- Testosterone exerts a significant effect on behaviour, and excessive levels are known to disrupt emotional regulation, leading to mood swings, irrational judgement, anger and aggression.
- **See Discussion Starter, ‘Testosterone and financial traders’**

## *Cognitive traits*

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- Early work surrounding trait theory (Mann (1959) identifies the role of intelligence as one of the greatest traits of leadership. Intelligence, as measured by standardized IQ (intelligence quotient) testing, measures the quotient of an individual against the general population.
- The role of intelligence in leadership continues to be well documented, correlating positively with leadership performance (Bass, 1990; Judge, Colbert & Elies, 2004), professional and personal success (including financial income), higher levels of education, and as a universally desired characteristic of leaders (Den Hartog et al. (1999). Cognitive ability also allows an individual to intellectually approach a problem from a myriad of different standpoints, allowing the development of a more strategic and robust approach to decision making.

## *Physical traits*

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- Physical attractiveness or the appearance of the face ('physiognomy') has emerged forcefully in the leadership literature as a trait that is strongly significantly related to a follower's perceptions of a leader. Cherulnik, Turns and Wilderman (1990) report that followers are more likely to respond favourably to a leader if they possess traits of physical attractiveness and maturity, and much leadership research supports such an observation.
- Studies of physiognomy in perceptions of leadership have emerged with particular strength in the field of political science, with many studies reporting that physical attractiveness leads to greater political success (Sigelman et al., 1986) and career success in a range of professions (Hamermesh, 2006; Hosoda et al., 2003; Mobius & Rosenblat, 2006), and experience better treatment in general (Dion et al., 1972; Griffin & Langlois, 2006).
- Martin (1978) asked research subjects to rate photographs of Australian political candidates according to their 'gut reaction' of the candidate. Ratings carried strong predictive power of the actual performance of those candidates on election day.
- **See Discussion Starter, 'The role of IQ in presidential elections'**

# Expert Insight

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- ‘The role of personality traits in leadership success’ (Bassma El Amir-Riley, Head of Trading for Government Bonds and Repo, Deutsche Bank)
- Read the Expert Insight, then answer and discuss the corresponding questions in small groups.
- Share your conclusions with the class, and be prepared to support your answers with reference to the academic theory that you have learnt during this weeks’ lecture/workshop.

## *Measuring trait theories*

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- Students should recall the central importance of only utilizing models, theories and instruments of measurement that are empirically valid and that correlate directly with the theory/model under consideration.
- The majority of personality trait instruments that possess adequate construct validity constitute Big Five trait measures. These include:
  - the NEO PI-R, a 240-item inventory, the NEO-FFI (Five-Factor Index) and the NEO-FFI a 60-item version of the NEO PI-R (Costa & McCrae); the Big Five Inventory (BFI; John, Donahue & Kentle, 1991)
  - the 100-item Trait Descriptive Adjectives (TDA; Goldberg, 1992)
  - the Big Five Inventory (BFI), a 44-item self-report measure (John, Donahue & Kentle, 1991)