

Central Traits vs. Peripheral Traits: Understanding Personality Dynamics

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In the intricate landscape of personality psychology, the distinction between central and peripheral traits plays a crucial role in shaping our understanding of human behavior. Central traits, the foundational qualities that define an individual's core identity, dictate how we perceive ourselves and how others perceive us. In contrast, peripheral traits, which are more context-dependent and situational, add nuance and variability to our personalities. By exploring the dynamics between these two types of traits, we can gain deeper insights into the complexities of personality, enabling us to appreciate both the stability and fluidity of human behavior. This article delves into the significance of central and peripheral traits, examining their implications for personal relationships, professional interactions, and self-awareness.

Central Traits and Peripheral Traits Definition

A central trait is an attribute in someone's personality that is considered particularly meaningful, in that its presence or absence signals the presence or absence of other traits. For example, if a person has a warm personality, it usually means that he or she is also friendly, courteous, cheerful, and outgoing--among many other possible traits. A peripheral trait is one whose presence or absence does not imply many other characteristics. For example, if a person is sarcastic, it might imply that he or she is cynical about the world or has a dark sense of humor--but not much else.

Usage and Implications of Central Traits and Peripheral Traits

The notion of central versus peripheral traits appears emerges in three related, but separate, areas of psychology.

Descriptions of Personality

The first usage of these terms crops up in descriptions of an individual's personality. Gordon Allport asserted that an individual's personality often contained between five to ten central traits that organized and influenced much of that person's behavior. What those five to ten traits were, however, differed from individual to individual, but if those traits could be identified, an observer could then predict how the person would respond in a wide variety of situations. At times, Allport conceded, a person's behavior might be dependent on more peripheral traits (which he termed secondary traits), but the operation of these traits would be much narrower than that of a person's central attributes.

Descriptions of Self

The second usage of central versus peripheral traits refers to people's perceptions of themselves. Central traits loom large in a person's self-concept; peripheral traits do not. According to

psychological theorists stretching back all the way to William James, self-esteem is influenced the most by people's performances along these central traits. For example, if intelligence is a central trait for a person, then academic performances will have a greater impact on self-esteem than it will for someone for whom intelligence is not central.

Studies show how a trait's centrality influences self-esteem as well as behavior. People like to do well along central traits. Indeed, they like to think of themselves as superior to others along these traits. This desire can even lead people to sabotage the efforts of their friends so that they can outperform those friends along central traits, according to the work by Abraham Tesser on his self-evaluation maintenance model. Along peripheral traits, no such sabotage occurs. Instead, people bask in the reflected glory of their friend's achievements along these peripheral dimensions and feel no envy about being outperformed.

The link between trait centrality and self-esteem, however, is complex. Failure along central traits does not guarantee a significant or long-lasting blow to self-esteem. This is because people often reevaluate a trait's centrality after succeeding or failing along it. If a person chronically fails in the classroom, for example, that person can choose to de-emphasize the centrality of academic achievement in his or her self-concept. If the person succeeds in some other arena--in social circles, for example--he or she can decide to emphasize traits relevant to that arena (e.g., social skills) as more central to their self-concept. Recent evidence shows that the traits people view as central to their self-concept just happen to be the ones that they already think they have. One would expect this if people constantly reanalyzed a trait's centrality based on past successes and failures.

Impressions of Others

The third usage of the concepts central versus peripheral traits focuses on perceptions of others. Information about central traits influences perceptions of others more than does information about peripheral traits. When people hear that another person possesses a central trait (e.g., moral), they are more willing to make a host of inferences about that person than if they hear that the person possesses a more peripheral trait (e.g., thrifty).

Two classic experiments demonstrate the impact that central traits have on people's impressions of others. In 1946, Solomon Asch presented some students with a description of a person who was intelligent, skillful, industrious, warm, determined, practical, and cautious. For other students, the term warm was replaced with cold. Students later described the first person much more positively--as wiser, happier, and more humorous, for example--than they did the second person. These differences arose, Asch argued, because warm and cold are central traits that have a powerful impact on the range of conclusions people are willing to reach about others. Supporting this view, replacing warm and cold with polite and blunt, respectively, did not carry the same impact,

presumably because these were more peripheral traits. Echoing Asch's findings, Harold Kelley in 1950 introduced a guest lecturer to a class to some students as a warm person and to others as a cold individual. Students receiving the first description were more likely to engage in class discussion and to rate the lecturer as effective and less formal.

One note should be mentioned about trait centrality for the self and trait centrality for judgments about others. Often, the traits considered central in the self-concept are also the traits that show up as more central in impressions of others. If extraversion is a trait that is central to a person's self-concept, he or she will judge others more centrally on whether they are extraverted. If morality is a central trait for self-esteem, morality is likely to operate as central trait in impressions of others. Theorists suspect that self-central traits are used more centrally in judgments of others because doing so bolsters self-esteem. If one's own attributes suggest so many other characteristics and abilities in other people, then those attributes must be important, and it must be good to possess such important traits.

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