

# Character and Personality

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About 10 years ago, academic researchers rediscovered personality and its relationship to job performance. More recently, after the events symbolized by the collapse of Enron and MCI, the business community seems to have rediscovered the importance of character as a determinant of job performance—especially in the senior ranks. These represent different insights in the popular literature because personality and character are usually considered separately. Nonetheless, the concepts of “character” and “personality” are closely linked; for example, Aristotle defined character in dispositional terms that are synonymous with the contemporary concept of personality. Moreover, the first academic journal devoted to personality research, established in 1932, was called *Character and Personality*. Gordon Allport, one of the founders of personality psychology in the U.S., remarked in his influential 1937 book that “character is personality evaluated, personality is character devaluated.”

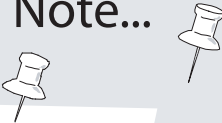
Personality psychology has always been outside the mainstream of academic psychology because it explicitly assumes that values are an inherent part of social life and that character is part of personality. Lee J. Cronbach, grand arbiter of psychological fashion for 50 years, denounced personality and personality assessment in his 1960 textbook because some of the concepts (i.e., integrity) are “value laden.” Like all good behaviorists, Cronbach wanted psychology to be like the physical sciences—values free. Poor old Cronbach never understood that the physical sciences, like the human sciences, are shot through with value considerations. Values are about preferences, they concern rules that people use to make choices in ambiguous circumstances. Tycho Brahe, Copernicus’ teacher, was a religious nut who thought the sun was God and therefore belonged at the center of the universe. His arbitrary value system set Copernicus on his quest to demonstrate that our universe revolves around the sun.


Character is a term that summarizes a set of values. Values are indispensable for navigating social life. The only question concerns how to justify one’s values. Most people justify their values by appealing to authority—legal or religious. The framers of the U. S. Constitution justified their value choices in terms of the welfare of society, a pragmatic decision that informs our thinking as well.


The most fundamental requirement for a functioning society is order—a system in which people comply with the established rules and customs of the group. However, in any functioning group, cheaters inevitably emerge and take advantage of those who are more compliant. This is an important principle in evolutionary theory: Cheaters inevitably emerge. Cheaters threaten the integrity of their groups with varying degrees of severity. People of good character, people with integrity, and people who support the rules and customs of their group are the foundation of a viable community.

Psychoanalysis argues that the fundamentals of character are set by about age five. And, as Freud noted, character is fate. Specifically, by about age five, a child's core self-esteem—guilt and self-doubt versus self-confidence and optimism—is largely settled. In addition, by about age five, a child's orientation toward rules and authority—rebellion and defiance versus effortless compliance—is largely set. Measures of self-esteem and attitudes toward authority powerfully predict job performance in adulthood. More importantly for a discussion of character, low scores on these measures powerfully predict delinquent conduct in adulthood. Poor self-esteem and defiance of rules and authority also predict some white-collar crime. However, white-collar crime is better predicted by adding values—specifically measures of selfishness and greed.

Good personality inventories—those that are backed by years of research and validation studies and of which there are few in the marketplace—predict both blue-collar and white-collar crime and delinquency, and can evaluate selfishness and greed. Personality, character, and personality assessment come together to predict important life outcomes with an accuracy that rivals the best in medical diagnosis, an outcome that would have given Cronbach fits.

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**Nov. 1** 

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November 1!**

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