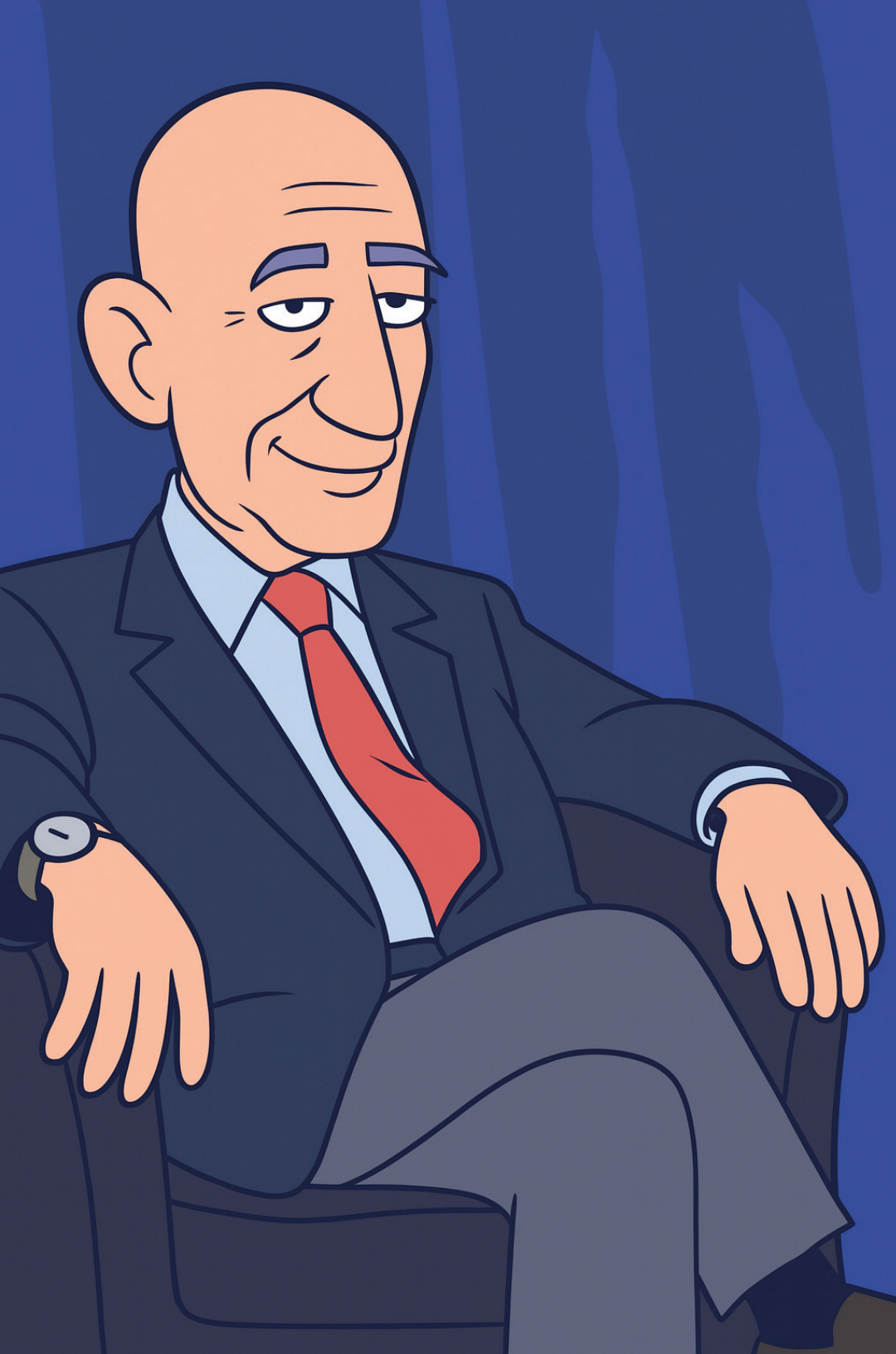
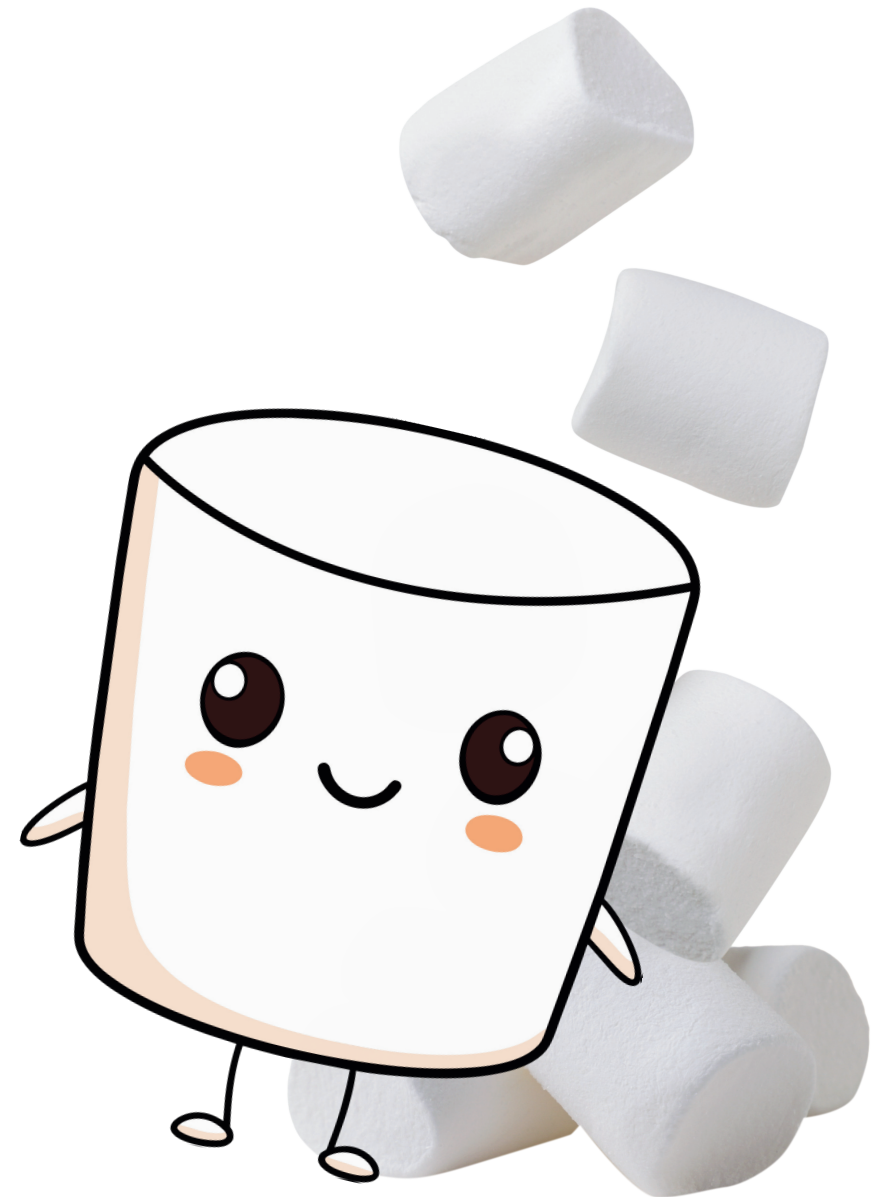




*Walter Mischel*  
**American Psychologist**



# Walter Mischel

## American Psychologist



Examine a Chosen Personality Theorist

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## Famous for his Marshmallow Test

A handout that summarizes the main ideas of him as a **personality theorist**, and works well as a quick, simple study guide for an introductory psychology student. My handout is designed to walk you through the main ideas of this personality theorist, and it's meant to serve as a clear, practical offering.

### Introduction

As you're reading this, I want to walk you through Walter Mischel's theory of personality in a way that's easy to follow. Mischel believed that our behavior isn't set in stone—it's shaped by both the situations we find ourselves in and, even more importantly, how we interpret those situations. This idea is often called the **personality vs. situation debate** (Reyna, 2018).

### The Core Idea

Here's the key takeaway:

- Personality is not fixed; it's flexible.
- Your behavior is influenced by the context you're in and the meaning you attach to it (Kurti, 2015).
- So instead of just asking, "What kind of person are you?" the better question is, "What kind of situation are you in, and how are you seeing it?"



## His Major Contribution

Mischel delivered his proof of willpower: that children aren't doomed by their impulses. By changing their strategies, they demonstrated that self-control could be strengthened, taught, and practiced (Carlson et al., 2018). It wasn't an inherited trait—it was a learnable skill. Decades later, follow-up studies confirmed the lasting power of that willpower (Kurti, 2015). Children who resisted his tempting tests scored higher on standardized tests, exhibited better health habits, and enjoyed more stable relationships in adulthood. Mischel described **self-control** as a kind of “**protective buffer**”—**a shield against future vulnerabilities**. In other words, just as a chef knows patience makes a dish come out right, Mischel showed that patience and self-discipline are the secret ingredients to success in life.

## How He Did It - The Famous Marshmallow Test

In the late 1960s, Walter Mischel whipped up what is now known as the marshmallow test—a deceptively simple recipe for studying willpower. Picture it: a preschooler sits at a table, staring down a **single** marshmallow. The rules are straightforward. They can ring a bell and eat it right away, or they can resist temptation until the researcher returns and be rewarded with **two** marshmallows. Some children, the “low delayers,” gobbled their treat almost immediately. Others, the “high delayers,” found creative ways to wait—covering their eyes, humming, fidgeting, or imagining the marshmallow as something bland and inedible, like a cotton ball. This clever reframing gave them the strength to hold out for the bigger prize. There is no problem using Oreo cookies to also do this test or Almond Joy candy pieces!



## Support for Diversity & Inclusion

- Mischel's theory emphasizes contextual factors in behavior, which is crucial for understanding people from different cultural, social, and economic backgrounds (Mischel, 1979).
- By showing that behavior shifts with situation and interpretation, his work helps avoid harmful stereotypes tied to rigid personality labels.
- Recognizing the role of subjective values and social context means his theory can be applied to diverse populations, respecting unique cultural priorities.
- In modern terms, his approach supports inclusion by reminding us that people's behavior cannot be separated from the systems and environments they live in.

## Ethics and Mischel's Theory

- **Ethical Strengths:**

- His focus on self-regulation empowers individuals to take ownership of their actions, aligning with APA's ethical principles of beneficence and respect for autonomy. According to the American Psychological Association (2023), the Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct emphasize beneficence, nonmaleficence, and respect for people's rights and dignity.
- By rejecting fixed personality labels, Mischel's work helps protect people from stigmatization.

- **Ethical Limitations:**

- The original marshmallow test was sometimes misapplied, ignoring the role of inequality and access to resources. Later research adjusted this, highlighting the importance of fairness and cultural context. Not every single trait or outcome could be proven to occur later in life, thus providing a failure to establish the occurrence 100% of the time (Benjamin et al., 2020).
- While Mischel did not explicitly frame his theory around ethics, his focus on context, fairness, and adaptability supports responsible, culturally sensitive practice.

## Conclusion

Walter Mischel revolutionized how psychologists think about personality by emphasizing interaction over traits (Reyna, 2018). His efforts and contributions, which led to the Cognitive-Affective Personality System (CAPS) and the famous marshmallow test, continue to influence psychology today (Canazas Bustíos et al., 2020). By considering context, values, and self-regulation, his work provides a flexible, ethical, and inclusive framework that remains highly relevant for both research and practice (Mischel, 1979).



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