Analysis of construct traits in personality theory

Word Count: 1521

Q: It is said that traits are important constructs in personality theory. Support or refute this statement.

1. INTRODUCTION

If you were every to ask a person to describe him or her self, he or she would probably make use of adjectives such as ' motivated', ' fun-loving', or maybe ' lazy' and ' disorganised'. These people would, in essence, be describing themselves by identifying aspects of what makes them who they are, factors or *traits* . Kassin (2003) identifies individuals' emotions, thoughts and behaviours as making up his or her personality. These can vary considerably from one person to the next. Therefore, in order to make the subject of personality more scientific, researchers such as Allport, Eysenck and Cattell, through a process of factor analysis, identified factors or aspects of personality, that are considerably stable across time. Personality traits. These researchers have not yet reached an absolute consensus on the precise number of traits, which may be used to accurately describe personality. Eysenck, for example identified the traits neuroticism, extraversion and psychoticism as sufficient in describing most aspects of personality. Cattell, however, identified 16 traits necessary in accounting for aspects of personality. These disparities arise out of differences in factor-analytic method used and the range of items analysed (Carr, 2004). The most dominant trait theory of recent years is the Five-Factor Model of Personality (MacCrae & Costa, 1999); a richer exploration of this will follow.

The following will consider the value of the construct traits in personality theory, by providing an overview of the literature on the construct traits, related theories and current research, concluding with a discussion on the findings.

2. DEFINITION

In considering the importance of the construct traits in personality theory, the author will look closer at the definition of personality and that of the construct traits.

2. 1. A Definition of Personality

It is said that there are as many definitions of personality as there are personality theorist. Pitts (1991: 609) highlights Gordon Allport's definition of personality, which identifies it as, ' *the dynamic organization within the individual of those psychophysical systems that determine his characteristic behaviour and thought',* as being widely accepted by most theorists. Kaplan and Sadock (1998: 775) define personality as, ' *a person's characteristic totality of emotional and behavioural traits apparent in ordinary life, a totality that is usually stable and predictable'* .

From these two comprehensive definitions, personality could therefore be seen as being both distinctive and characteristic, and as describing a style of interacting in everyday life. Since each person is complexly unique, it is not surprising that the task of describing, and even more so, measuring personality is also highly complex.

On returning to the question, and considering the above definition of personality, it would appear that for the construct traits to play a significant role in personality theory they need to be able to accurately describe an individual's general disposition, and identify these as being stable across the life-span.

2. 2. A Definition of Traits

Traits are said to be those things that make us who we are. More specifically, ' *traits are relatively enduring personal characteristics, which, along with situational variables, influence behaviour, cognition and affect* ' (Carr, 2004: 181).

In considering the above definition, the following terms are highlighted: *relatively enduring* and *situational* . The author highlights these terms specifically, as they impact on the importance of traits on personality theory, in that traits, according to this definition, are not necessarily stable across the life span and are situationally influenced. For example, the trait ' honest' is very often used in describing an individual, yet this particular trait is often very dependent on a given situation. Despite these possible limitations of trait theory, the author considers the clear approach traits provide in understanding and describing personality and personal interactions, as well as a tool for comparing individuals.

3. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Factor-analytic approaches and trait theories have arisen in recent years as a welcomed alternative to abstract theorising, in identifying aspects of

personality that influences an individual respond in varying situation (Pitts, 1991). Raymond Cattell, using a set of observable, surface personality traits, identified a small group of 16 primary traits, as being central to personality. While, Hans Jurgen Eysenck proposed a 3-trait model. More recently, the Five-Factor Model (MacCrae & Costa, 1999) has emerged as a front-runner of trait theories, as it provides a middle road between the extreme positions of Cattell and Eysenck (Carr, 2004).

The Author will now consider these approaches to trait theory in greater depth.

3. 1. Raymond Cattell

In his aim to improve the predictive techniques of personality theory, in estimating a persons behaviour in a given situation, Raymond Cattell began by identifying names, ' *used to describe traits or characteristics of personality'* (Pitt, 1991: 623). From a list of 18 000 trait names, Cattell reduced this to 160. Then, through a process of factor analysis, he further reduced this number to 16 factors. Cattell described these 16 factors on a continuum, in a view that each person possess, to some degree, every trait. Everybody has some degree of every trait. These traits in: Abstractedness, Apprehension, Dominance, Emotional Stability, Liveliness, Openness to Change, Perfectionism, Privateness, Reasoning, Rule Consciousness, Self-Reliance, Sensitivity, Social Boldness, Tension, Vigilance and Warmth. Cattell considered these 16 factors as ' *source* traits', which form the basis of personality (Pitt, 1991, 623). In 1949 Cattell published these findings in an assessment tool, the 16PF.

According to Fehriinger(2004: ¶16), despite Cattell's 16-factor theory having made great contributions to the development of personality theory, his theory has received vast criticism. The most prominent criticism being that despite numerous attempts to replicate the 16 Personality Factor Model, an entire replication has never been achieved. Yet, despite criticism, Fehriinger (2004: ¶16) identifies the contribution of Cattell's theory in that, '*investigation into to the validity of Cattell's model researchers did discover the Big Five Factors, which have been monumental in understanding personality, as we know it today*' .

3. 2. Hans Jurgen Eysenck

According to Eysenck, personality can be represented on three dimensions, which are uncorrelated with each other; he labelled them extraversion, neuroticism and psychoticism (Pitt, 1991). Eysenck suggested that each person exhibits set responses to external and internal stimuli and that these will vary in accordance with the intensity of the stimuli, the situation and state of mind (Pitt, 1991). These set responses then develop into predictable trends, for example, a person may feel intimidated by large crowds, and as a result, limit his or her contact with specific situations. When this avoidance becomes a normal defence to coping with crowds, it becomes a habit. This behaviour may also then extend to other situations, such as social functions or days out in the city. When these responses are combined, they form traits.

Jang (1998: ¶27) identifies the following contributions of Eysenck's approach to the development of personality theory.

- By combing descriptive and casual aspects of personality, Eysenck's model is considered more credible than other descriptive models.

- It is both comprehensive and descriptive, a critical aspect for comparison with other trait theories.

- The experimental approach adopted by Eysenck in the study of personality, makes this model more evidence based. Making this model more likely *" to generate more specific predictions because knowledge about the functioning of the specified physiological structures is available"*.

Despite these identified contributions, Eysenck's theory has received criticism in that it has been found to concentrate too extensively on extraversion, and has not made any expansion. A further criticism is that the unitary nature of extraversion, a premise of his theory, has been questioned.

3. 3. Five-Factor Model

The Five-Factor Model has drawn on the insights of Cattell, Eysenck and others, and includes the following dimensions: Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to Experience and Agreeableness and Conscientiousness (Carr, 2004). According to Srivastava (2006), the five-factor model has made significant contributions to the development of personality theory, in that it established a common taxonomy, doing away with a previously disorganised field. Furthermore, the five-factor model is distinguished from other theories is that it is based on language, rather than on ideas from an individual psychologist.

Further support is found for the five-factor model, in that meta-analysis has confirmed the predictive value of this model across a range of behaviors. Saulsman and Page (2004, as cited in Srivastava, 2006) examined the relationship between the five-factor model and each of the 10 personality disorder categories in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (* DSM-IV *)*. These researchers found that across 15 independent samples, each disorder displayed a unique and predictable five-factor profile (Srivastava, 2006).

4. DISCUSSION

From the afore gone exploration on personality theory and traits, the author is able to identify both strengths and weaknesses of the construct traits. Since trait theory is largely based on statistical data, it removes any bias influence and remains objective, unlike other personality theories, which are based on subjective personal experiences. Furthermore, it is a clear and easy to apply approach for use in understanding people. However, the criticisms remain that it is a poor predictor of future behaviour and fails to address developmental issues. Despite these, the author is able to identify the importance of the construct trait in personality theory.

5. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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