

Trait and
psychodynamic
theories of
personality
psychology essay



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Personality theories concentrate on how traits are developed and how behaviour is generated. Personality traits are durable dispositions of behaviour that occur across a variety of situations. They are like tendencies; a person's predisposition to react in a certain way in various different situations. Trait theories focus on identifying the characteristics we possess and the degree to which we possess them. However trait theories are starting to address concerns such as how behaviours are developed, how traits are generated and how our goals and motivations affect the development of traits and the degree to which we possess them (Mischel, 1996). On the other hand, psychodynamic theories of human behaviour assume that human lives are ruled by internal unconscious forces and that these forces; which may be images, opinions, or feelings are the chief determinants of who they are and what they do (Kaslow, Magnavita & Patterson, 2002). This essay will relate trait theory in comparison to psychodynamic theory.

Gordon Allport's trait theory views personality as a combination of stable internal characteristics that an individual displays in a given situation. Conversely, Sigmund Freud's psychodynamic approach emphasizes the interplay of unconscious irrational forces struggling for control in shaping one's personality. Freud believes that human functioning is influenced by three basic structures of the mind: the id, the ego, and the superego, which emerge developmentally. The id, as stated by Freud, is present at birth and

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works on the pleasure principle. The ego operates on the reality principle and attempts to satisfy the id while obeying society's rules. The emergence of the ego for Freud symbolizes the origin of consciousness and he refers it as the superego; which is the internalized rules of parents in society (Bernstein, Penner, Clarke-Stewart & Roy, 2011). On the other side of the coin, Allport argues that varying strengths of many qualities or traits actually determine the personality of a person. Allport had three categories of traits: the cardinal traits, the central traits, and lastly the secondary traits. The cardinal traits govern and shape a person's behavior. Central traits are characteristics that others use to describe another individual. Secondary traits are circumstantial. More recently, trait theorists have identified five main factors that make up personality; Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism (Pastorino & Doyle-Portillo, 2012). Thus one can assert that traits are relatively stable predispositions to behave in a certain way whereas psychodynamic theory deals with unconscious motivations and conflicts in one's head.

Allport uses the concept of personal disposition and the idiographic approach which focuses on studying one person at a time to explain that every human being possesses unique traits that create a personalised type of behaviour in a particular situation. He also specifies that traits are exclusive characteristics to a particular person alone which generates consistent and specific behaviour patterns (Carducci, 2009). On the contrary, psychodynamic theorists focus on group behaviour and making comparisons between people while describing dynamic interactions between individuals (Jarvis, 2004). Thus one can affirm that the trait approach to personality

focuses on predicting a specific individual behavior whereas psychodynamic theories centre on predicting typical behaviour of a group of people.

Psychodynamic theorists believe that many of our actions depend on hidden beliefs and emotions. These unconscious forces can bring a change in an individual's behaviour and personality. When a person meets other individuals; he involuntarily experiences a must to behave as they do in order to be accepted. Thus, he suppresses more of his tendencies to be more compatible with the norms of society (Collins & O'Rourke, 2008). In contrast, an individual's behaviour is likely to stay relatively consistent across a broad range of situations over the course of time due to the enduring and stabilizing impact of traits (Mischel, 1996). Hence one can argue that trait theory focuses on constancy in personality while psychodynamic theory hints at change in personality.

Trait researchers usually study the processes behind the behaviour related with a specific trait. For example, some psychologists are keen in examining the underlying concerns of shy people which keep them away from the social world (Burger, 2010). Nonetheless psychodynamic theories stress upon the importance of early childhood experiences, the significance of repressed feelings and internal disputes between the conscious and unconscious forces that manipulate our thoughts and behaviour (Plotnik & Kouyoumdjian, 2010). Therefore one can state that trait theory focuses on indentifying the mechanisms underlying behaviour while psychodynamic theory emphasizes on describing personality and predicting behaviour instead of explaining why people behave the way they do.

Early research has shown that natural physical endowment is more important than environment in determining personality in the sense that it is not simply likely to produce a light or superficial impact on the image that an individual projects vis-à-vis others in the society but rather it is the prime factor which decides whether he or she will be favourably or unfavourably perceived by others in the community. However ownership of a specific trait does not guarantee success in a specific field; for example, honesty, self-confidence and the ability to motivate others are some of the few characteristics which determine leadership. More recent research study showed that an individual possessing the traits mentioned above does not necessarily score high on leadership performance. Combination of both the leadership traits and management skills are needed to create effective leaders (Novick, Morrow & Mays, 2007). On the other hand, Freud's psychodynamic theory emphasize hugely on the disputes between conscious and unconscious forces that manipulate our views and actions (Plotnik & Kouyoumdjian, 2010). Thus one can claim that trait theories integrate both the nature and nurture approach when shaping personality while psychodynamic theories rely mainly on the conscious and unconscious forces guiding an individual's behaviour.

To conclude; trait theorists are more concerned with indentifying individual characteristics which when combined can be used to describe personality. Proponents of the psychodynamic theory rely heavily on the dynamic forces of the subconscious to explain the perceptions, and behaviours of individuals. These behaviours can lead people to behave in ways that are ineffective and even self-destructive (Mischel, 1996).