Theories of personality | essay

Psychologists have long been interested in the study of personality because it is useful for understanding and predicting human behaviour. Even laypersons in day to day life, on an intuitive basis, make personality judgements about individuals they meet based on social characteristics, intellectual quality and appearance. Moreover, one seeks to understand oneself by identifying and developing personality. Personality determines the way in which individuals think and behave, it affects the way one would conduct oneself in day to day actions. Individuals possess unique patterns of behaviour varying from the way one walks, talks, or eats to the way one spends free time. The vast array of forms that personality takes accounts for why individuals are different from one another. The reason why it is important to understand such individual differences of personality is because job performance, academic performance, political and social attitudes, social relationships and health are all affected by one's personality.

Personality psychology seeks to bring scientific rigor to the process of understanding different personalities. Apparent qualities and behaviours may differ from the real inner personality of an individual. Consequently defining and understanding personality is a difficult task. A significant amount of definitions of personality have been introduced by various psychologists. Among such definitions was a comprehensive definition put forward by Burger. Burger (2011) defined personality as consistent behaviour patterns and intrapersonal processes that originate from within the individual. Due to the complexity of understanding and identifying human personality, various theories of personality have been introduced over the years by various psychologists.

Sigmund Freud, devised what is today a popular theory, known as the structural theory of personality (Freud 1923 cited in McLeod 2013). The theory was devised based on the psychodynamic perspective which emphasises the influence that forces and drives within the unconscious mind have on human behaviour. Freud portrayed the human mind as an iceberg (Freud 1900, 1905 cited in McLeod 2013). The tip of the iceberg, which is the small section visible above the surface, symbolises the conscious mind. Just beneath the conscious mind is the preconscious mind which is outside one's awareness but is easily accessible. The bottom of the iceberg which takes up the majority of its volume is the unconscious mind. The structural theory of personality assembles personality into 3 systems; the id, ego and superego. The balance of these 3 structures results in one's personality.

The id, which is in the unconscious mind, is the instinctive and primitive component of personality. Life instincts (Eros) and death instincts (Thanatos) are the basic instincts that are constituent of the id (Freud 1920, 1925 cited in McLeod 2013). The id operate on the pleasure principle in which basic instincts, specifically the desire for food and sex, require immediate gratification, regardless of any consequences (Freud 1920 cited in McLeod 2008). The id, similar to the way of an infant crying in order to get what it wants, has no regard for social norms. In order to mediate between the external world and the selfish desires of id, the ego develops. The ego, abiding in the conscious mind, is the component of personality that makes decisions and finds realistic and reasonable ways to satisfy the desires of id. The ego's essentiality is to make compromises and exercise social etiquette in order to avoid disapproval or consequences of society. There is a third

influential and largely unconscious set of forces which dictates one's beliefs and morals, called the superego. One's beliefs of what is right and wrong is acquired through childhood experiences and nurturing. When one behaves in a way that one believes is morally incorrect, the superego causes one to feel guilty. Superego's goal unlike the id and ego is moral perfection. According to the manner in which the id, ego and superego interact, Freud suggested that there are 3 personalities; the psychotic personality, neurotic personality and healthy personality. A healthy psyche is one of which the ego's role is dominant over superego and id. When the conflict between superego and id become overwhelming the unconscious processes of ego use defence mechanisms (repression being one of the most common defence mechanisms) in order to protect the self from anxiety. The psychotic psyche is one in which id is dominant and causes the individual to act in an impulsive and asocial manner. The neurotic psyche is one in which superego is governing and causes the individual to be a perfectionist, unreasonably guilty and neurotic if any moral code is broken to obtain pleasure.

The structural theory of personality is a highly comprehensive theory. The theoretical system explicitly explains and interprets an exceptional range of human behaviour and experiences, which is essential in understanding the different types of personalities. Contemporary psychology engages certain concepts of the psychodynamic theory and heuristic value of the theory has been appreciated (Shaver and Mikulincer 2005). Freud's controversial ideas – that unconscious forces exist and influence behaviour, that early experiences play a large role in development of personality, that individuals resist threats by using defence mechanisms and that conflicting feelings often result in

compromise – are accepted now by many psychologists and research conducted has given evidence to the validity of Freud's views (Westen 1998; Baumeister, Dale and Sommer 1998). While other perspectives, particularly social and cognitive perspectives, emphasise typically on proximal causes, the psychodynamic perspective emphasise on distal causes of behavioural processes as well. The use of case studies as a research method to study personality esteems the complexity of personality and resulting behaviour by investigating in depth as opposed to a brief, snapshot laboratory study.

However critics assert that there are several problems with the case study method that Freud used in constructing the structural theory of personality. Patients' observations were not recorded immediately upon hearing them, therefore Freud's memory of such detailed and extensive accounts of participants may have been distorted, and/or later recorded in a biased manner (Sulloway 1991). Furthermore the subjects of Freud's case studies, on most occasions, were wealthy European individuals making the meagre sample unrepresentative and too illusive to draw universal conclusions about human behaviour. Consequently, the precision of the structural theory of personality is impaired.

The testability of the structural theory is a major problem because propositions and concepts are ambiguous. The ambiguity results in difficulty in deriving a clear hypothesis that can be put to test and proven. Much of the theory is presented in metaphors – life and death instincts, and the mind depicted as an iceberg – which complicates any attempt to scientifically test and prove the theory. In addition, the structural theory of personality helps in explaining behaviour after observation but does not contribute substantially

to predicting behaviour, which essentially, is a main purpose of studying personality in the first place.

The theory can further be criticised because it is deterministic. It gives a degrading and pessimistic view of human nature because one is thought to be irrational and controlled by sex and aggressive tendencies. While numerous assumptions come into play, the explanation is still restricted to biological forces, and ignores other influences on personal development that may include altruism, competence, exploration and freewill.

The scientific validity of Freud's theory has been challenged by Eysenck. After a review of clinical literature, Eysenck found that out of 7, 000 case histories of neurotic patients, 66% of patients treated by means of psychoanalysis improved, however 72% of patients who were not treated by means of any therapy improved within 2 years after the onset of their illness (Eysenck 1952). These findings oppose the validity of the concepts of the psychoanalytical approach and the structural theory of personality.

A contemporary theory of personality proposed by Mischel and Shoda takes into account the cognitive and affective processes that have an influence on behaviour and gives more focus to situationism. Situationism is the assumption that individuals' behaviour is directed by the situation the individual is in rather than dispositional traits. The cognitive-affective system theory of personality was proposed to resolve the contradictory findings on the consistency of personality and the inconsistency of behaviour across situations (Mischel and Shoda 1995). According to the cognitive-affective systems theory, there are 2 important concepts that must be combined. The

first is that in order to understand an individual, the individual's thoughts must be understood. Therefore the individual's representation of the world is a significant factor to consider. The second is that thought proceeds concurrently on multiple tracks which intersect occasionally. The theory conceptualises personality as ' a stable system that mediates how the individual selects, construes, and processes social information and generates social behaviours' (Mischel and Shoda 1995). Essentially, the interaction between cognition and personality affects behaviour in different situations. The reason why there are inconsistencies in behaviour is not due to the situation alone or random error; it stems from patterns of variation within the individual which are called behavioural signatures of personality (Mischel and Shoda 1995). Stable variations of behaviour take place in the form of contingencies: if X, then A but if Y then B. Behaviour occurs as a result of personal dispositions and cognitive and affective qualities (particularly thinking, planning, evaluating and feeling) interacting with the situation.

Cognitive-affective units are represented by 5 stable person variables (Mischel and Shoda 1995). The first is encoding strategies, or individuals' unique way of categorising information from stimuli. The second is competencies and self-regulatory strategies, particularly intelligence, the individual's goals and self-produced consequences. Third is one's expectancies and beliefs, or one's predictions of the outcome of each of the behavioural possibilities in the situation. Fourth is one's goals and values and finally, affective responses including feelings, emotions and affects caused by physiological reactions.

The cognitive-affective personality systems theory is a comprehensive theory that accounts for both situational and dispositional attributes, bringing a balance between the two attributes. Freud's psychoanalytical theory overlooks situations and attributes individuals' personality and behavioural traits largely to dispositions. Thus the cognitive-affective personality systems theory can be better applied to a variety of different situations. It offers a stable personality system while maintaining that there may be patterns of variations in behaviour, without resulting in controversy.

Unlike Freud's theory, the cognitive affective personality systems theory gives highlight to conscious rather than unconscious drives. Individuals are regarded as being able to set their own goals, plan and evaluate their actions, and even to think about thinking. Therefore Mischel's theory is less deterministic and considers freewill. The cognitive-affective systems theory has a more positive outlook on humankind, perceiving individuals as unified, affective, purposive and social beings, as opposed to the negative outlook of the structural theory of personality. Both the structural theory and the cognitive-affective systems theory of personality are idiographic and appreciate the uniqueness of individuals. The theories do not seek to establish generalizations of personality types. The cognitive-affective systems theory suggests that every individual has his/her own unique behaviour signature and unique pattern of variation (Mischel and Shoda 1995). Freud used case studies because each client had unique experiences and unique configurations of defence mechanisms. However when concentrating on the psychic energies, id, ego and superego, that are allegedly common to all individuals the structural theory of personality may

arguably be nomothetic to a certain extent. In addition, the cognitive-affective systems theory must be commended for being idiographic because it also maintains its scientific nature.

The cognitive-affective systems theory, unlike the structural theory, is scientific and pragmatic. Its propositions are unambiguous and testable hypotheses can be derived. The theory is based on the findings of experiments, including an experiment that was conducted in 1965 to investigate the effect situational and generalised expectancies for success have on on choices of immediate, less valuable non-contingent rewards as opposed to delayed, more valuable contingent rewards (Mischel and Staub 1965). In addition another study was conducted to test whether individuals are able to voluntarily delay gratification in await for a preferred reward (Mischel and Ebbesen 1970). Both studies reveal how individuals examine the situation and and make a cognitive decision about the reward they decide to settle for, thereby giving sound evidence for the cognitive-affective personality theory. Furthermore, a study revealed that 4 year old children who were able to delay gratification were significantly different from their peers as adolescents; they were more intelligent, exhibited more self-control, less distractible and more resistant to temptation than the adolescents who were less able to delay gratification as 4 year olds (Shoda, Mischel and Peake 1990). The finding from that study shows a similarity between psychoanalytic and cognitive-affective concepts of personality. Both perspectives suggest that personality characteristics emerge from childhood and is considerably consistent over time.

However a limitation of the cognitive-affective personality system is that it emphasises mainly on the effect of nurture while overlooking the effect that nature might have on human behaviour. The theory overlooks biological and unconscious influences that may affect personality. Contrastingly, the structural theory of personality takes into account that both the effect of nurture and nature influence personality and its development.

A further problem with the cognitive-affective personality theory is that defining a situation is difficult therefore the number of interactions that come into play when determining behaviour are too complex to study clearly. Moreover, it is difficult to take the complexity of the relationship between the situation, personality and behaviour into account when in extreme positions.

The field of personality psychology has witnessed many theories being brought into the spotlight with each theory contributing more or less to understanding human behaviour. The contribution that Freud and Mischel have provided are indeed valuable. Freud made the first attempt to explain human personality and is considered a legacy for his work. Psychologists that followed in attempt to explain personality either improved upon Freud's ideas or opposed it and provided alternate theories. However, due to the lack of empiricism of the psychoanalytic approach, Mischel's cognitive-affective personality systems theory surpasses the structural theory of personality and can be better applied to predicting and explaining human behaviour. The theory does not oversimplify the complex processes behind personality; it takes a holistic view and considers that one behaves according to the situation one is in and that the course of action that one takes is not taken passively but actively. The cognitive-affective theory has minimal loopholes

and is one of the most useful theories that has been developed to understand the multifaceted human personality.

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