

Benefits of the psychology of personality



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The psychology of personality enables us to understand ourselves better than it allows us to understand others. Critically evaluate this statement, giving empirical and/or theoretical evidence to support your arguments.

According to Kohut (2013), personality is not a clearly defined and measured concept; therefore in order to understand ourselves and other people we have constructed implicit personality theories, through observing others' behaviour and experiencing social interactions (Maltby, Day & Macaskill, 2010). However, it is also clear that individual differences occur, making the study of personality more complex, and one which is highly influenced by and reliant on subjectivity. This produces problems with reliably understanding others, and also raises unexpected questions as to whether studying personality really does allow us to understand ourselves better than other people.

Allport (1955), expresses personality as a process of 'becoming', unique to each individual and their context, and considers that individual differences are made sense of through comparison with accepted concepts. It would therefore make sense that many theories in personality research base themselves on common sense and rely heavily on intuition, often without explicit knowledge (Heider, 2013). Furthermore, psychological research (within personality psychology and other areas) is often directly influenced by personal experience. Allport also commented that by understanding ourselves and identifying issues which are important to our own experience, we are then able to collect structured knowledge about other people.

Empirical research by Chiu, Hong and Dweck (1997) demonstrated that an individual's understanding of themselves influences their view of the

personalities of others, through pattern projection, and that forms implicit personality theories. This suggests that we have an existing deeper knowledge of ourselves and that as we develop this we also cultivate theories about the behaviour of other people around us which allows us to understand them.

If then, understanding ourselves enables a better understanding of others, it is important to consider how personality psychology allows us to understand ourselves better. Firstly, much of the terminology used (such as 'self-actualisation' and 'self-concept') places emphasis on our knowledge of ourselves and how individual awareness should be strived for, as shown by Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. The Need Satisfaction Inventory has been produced in order to operationalise and confirm Maslow's theory using college students (Lester, 1990); this has provided more grounded evidence for ideas about achieving happiness and potential. Furthermore, the Jungian personality types are based on the concepts of 'thinking', 'feeling', 'sensing' and 'intuition' (Jung, 1998), placing emphasis on the internal and subjective, and classifying people using these individual processes. There are elements of psychology which take internal processes to be irrelevant, such as operant and classical conditioning, which rely on genetics and situational factors (Pavlov, 1927; Skinner, 1938). Yet, personality psychology is concerned with what makes people different, and therefore focuses on the internal thoughts and processes which make a person who they are. We are clearly interested in the motives and causes of behaviour and this is one of the main reasons for studying personality (Maltby, Day & Macaskill, 2010).

Subsequently much research is based entirely on subjective processes as this allows us to understand ourselves better.

Ullén, de Manzano, Almeida, Magnusson and Pederson (2012), looked at the phenomenon of 'flow' within personality psychology. This involved measuring 'flow proneness' using self-report, as flow is a subjective experience which involves enjoyment, low self-awareness and effortless actions when engaging in an activity of interest. The theory is based entirely on subjective experience as flow cannot be measured empirically or be identified by people other than the individual experiencing flow. Due to research such as this, logically it would appear that while undertaking personality research it should be easier to understand ourselves. We have direct information about our history, private behaviours, thoughts and feelings which others do not have, and that we do not have about other people (Vazire & Carlson, 2010).

However, there are limitations to the amount that we can understand our own personality and internal processes. Wilson (2009) commented on the use of introspection in psychology, stating that it may not be as effective as first thought, as many aspects of ourselves are hidden from conscious awareness, limiting its ability to provide us with self-knowledge. This notion of the unconscious is grounded in psychodynamic psychology and Freudian concepts. Freud considered the unconscious and reasoned that there is much of our thoughts, feelings and internal information about ourselves which is unknown to us. Freud considered consciousness to be a dynamic system, whereby unconscious thoughts manifest themselves in various ways such as dreams and 'Freudian slips' (Power, 2000). When understanding a <https://assignbuster.com/benefits-of-the-psychology-of-personality/>

person we put emphasis on their motives, rather than just the observed behaviour, however we cannot pass any judgement on the unconscious (ours or others') or make generalisations about unconscious processes, as it is beyond our cognition (Jung, 1998). In more recent research, Carlson (2013) provides research suggesting that mindfulness can improve self-knowledge, especially into internal aspects of personality such as thoughts and emotions. Mindfulness, as opposed to introspection, is being more aware of our own internal thoughts and processes without needing immediate explanation and justification- we simply observe our own state. Carlson considers that we can measure both trait and state mindfulness and that this may overcome the barriers of information and ego-defence which can distort our understanding of ourselves.

Despite this, it is clear that currently we cannot fully understand ourselves; it has also been explored that this process is intrinsically linked to, rather than preceding, our understanding of others. Heider (2013) explains that as soon as we enter into an interaction with someone else we cannot be analysed and viewed separately from that person and the environment we are in. We respond to what others think of us, or what we perceive to be their views. Vazire and Carlson (2010) go further than behaviour and consider that an individual cannot develop a full understanding of themselves without considering the perspective of people who know them well. Others can see things about our personality and provide insights that we cannot, this is due to blind spots, as we sometimes have too much or too little information or self-presentation motivations which can distort our considerations. We do not view ourselves objectively as others do, which inhibits our understanding of

ourselves. Vazire (2010) produced the Self-Other Knowledge Asymmetry (SOKA) model to illustrate that both the individual and the people close to them have insight into different aspects of their personality.

When we consider these ideas when understanding others, on an explicit level it is clear that the only way to find out what people are thinking is to ask them (Baumeister, Vohs & Funder, 2007), however this produces a large reliance on self report, and raises methodological issues and problems. The Eysenck Personality Questionnaire, or EPQ (Eysenck, Eysenck & Barrett, 1975) is used to measure personality using yes/no judgements by individuals on a series of statements. The self report asks questions such as: ' Do you often wonder about things you should have done or said?', ' Do you often feel lonely?' and ' Are your feelings easily hurt?' Considering Vazire and Carlson's point, people close to the individual may have an insight and may be able to correct with regards to demand characteristics, however behaviour does not always reflect feelings and beliefs, leaving the self report with a large potential for bias. This is partly due to poor predictive validity which leads Baumeister, Vohs and Funder (2007) to argue that Social and Personality psychology disciplines are not really measuring behaviour because of their reliance on self report. They explain that there are often discrepancies between what people say they will do and how they actually behave, meaning that observations and direct experiments would be a more reliable way to study behaviour, and that self-report should be used to accompany these to provide deeper understanding. However, psychology is the study of why people do what they do, so this comment could be considered irrelevant if the emphasis of personality psychology is to explain

internal processes and understand why people act as they do (Maltby, Day & Macaskill, 2010). Adler (1998) would argue that everything happens with conscious intent and that observing behaviour actually gives no insight into what is occurring within an individual. Furthermore, self-reports do not occur in isolation from the environment, therefore situational factors have an influence on the extent to which personality characteristics are displayed, which in turn may affect an individual's perception of themselves and subsequently their self-report judgements (Ajzen, 2005).

Additionally, self-reports are snap judgements which do not give much information into understanding others, yet can be useful for developing models and theories to explain general internal processes and behaviour (Baumeister, Vohs and Funder, 2007). For example, attachment theory relies on past experiences (Bretherton, 1992) and has proved a highly influential model used in many areas of psychology. As a model, it has been reliably based on observation of behaviour and has helped us to understand others, and even to make inferences about personality; however on an individual basis we often do not have the information available to allow us to make direct attribution retrospectively. We need to understand the full context and the goal of the individual and in this way we understand ourselves but not others. Models provide information about general behaviour, yet perhaps they only aid true understanding of ourselves and not others; when it comes down to environment and experience we know ourselves.

Subsequently, the use of self-reports in personality psychology poses questions as to the degree to which we are developing an understanding of others. On the contrary, Lounsbury, Levy, Leong and Gibson (2007)

<https://assignbuster.com/benefits-of-the-psychology-of-personality/>

conducted a study into the Big Five personality traits and whether they influence sense of identity in an individual. Although a causal relationship could not be established, their research showed that each of the personality traits were related to, and subsequently may influence, identity. In this way, personality research allows us to develop an understanding of others and often inspire further research. The question is simply the degree to which research like this is able to produce understanding; the preceding points have shown that this may not be as strong as we would think. Reanalysis of such studies has shown reliability in self-report measures. McCrae and Costa (1987) showed strong cross-validation for measures of the five factor personality, showing that self-reports can provide us with insight into behaviour and be relied upon in some cases.

So, in conclusion, it has become evident that the study of ourselves and others within personality psychology is perhaps more complex than first thought. This essay has raised many issues. Firstly, it is unclear as to how well personality psychology allows us to understand ourselves. On a conscious level it would appear that whilst trying to understand any aspect of personality we develop a clearer understanding of our own, however, research has shown limitations to this (Wilson, 2009; Power, 2000). Overall, it can be seen that we develop a better understanding of ourselves, yet this may not be to a greater extent than others; it may in fact be a joint process of understanding ourselves and understanding those around us (Heider, 2013; Vazire and Carlson, 2010). Alternatively, when we consider how much we are developing a better understanding of others, there are limitations in the use of self-reports, as it is hard to know the degree of understanding we

are gaining and whether this is providing us with a full picture (Ajzen, 2005). Therefore, there are many considerations which make it hard to know the extent of the understanding gained in personality psychology. Perhaps this is also dependent on interpretation of the word ' understanding' and the information needed. If a general knowledge of behaviour is adequate, then the models and theories provided by the discipline can help us to understand both ourselves and others to some degree. However, if we seek understanding on a deeper level, we may have to consider that personality psychology may not currently have all the answers needed for deeper insight in ourselves or others.