Critically assess the strengths and weaknesses of personal construct

In social psychology, individual difference research aims to find out why individuals act differently in the same scenarios (Butt, 2007). This essay will be looking at two different theories which study and interpret individual differences to personality in two different ways. Kelly's (1955, cited in Butt, 2007; Stevens, 2002) personal construct theory and Eysenck and Rathman's (1965, cited in Butt, 2007) trait theory of personality will be outlined and then trait theory will be used to critique, and find the strengths and weaknesses of, personal construct theory to see how it contributes to our understanding of individual differences in personality. This essay will argue that the strength of the personal construct theory is that it gives a much more holistic contribution to our understanding of individual differences in personality than the trait theory, although unlike the trait theory, its weakness is that its findings can not be generalised. Personal construct theory also has strength in that it transcends the individual-social and agency-structure dualisms which the trait theory does not.

Personal construct theory, developed by Kelly (1955, cited in Butt, 2007; Stevens, 2002) viewed personality as an individual experience. It advocates bipolar constructs that individuals use to help them understand their world, for example, stimulating-dull (Stevens, 2002). Personal construct theory uses the phenomenological approach and therefore aims to understand how individuals use their subjective, individual experiences to develop a set of personal constructions, which in turn, helps them to make sense of their world around them (Butt, 2004). This helps to understand the individuals lived experience, how they make meaning and how they come to view the world in different ways (Butt, 2007, cited in Butt, 2007). Personal construct

theory therefore sees individual differences as recognising and taking account of each individuals world view and the conscious role they have in creating the individual they become and the personality they have (Butt, 2007; Stevens, 2002).

To investigate each individuals set of personal constructs, Kelly (1955, cited in Butt, 2007) developed the repertory grid. This grid worked by individuals allocating personal constructs to everyone who they considered as part of their life. This subsequently allowed bipolar dimensions to be found. When analysing these constructions, it could be revealed how each individual experiences others and could show how two different individuals could make an entirely different assessment of the same person, for example, if an individual is fixed in their constructs they could come to believe that an individual who is reserved is always cold and so having a fixed personality could cause many relationship problems compared to having a fluid personality.

A lot of constructing occurs subconsciously so the grid allows individuals to gain and communicate their own individual meanings of things that would otherwise be unavailable. Personal construct theory sees constructs as being adjustable and, by seeing themselves through an others eyes, individuals could make conscious decisions to change their personality and view of the world (Butt, 2007). But Kelly (1955, cited in Butt, 2007) argued that as much effort is placed in these constructions the individual may not want to change them.

The fundamental parts of personal construct theory were usefully applied by Salmon (2003, cited in Butt, 2007) to education. Salmon (2003, cited in Butt, 2007) argued that to facilitate personal development, schools needed to take into account the student's current personal constructs and the student's also needed to be aware of their own personal constructs. Salmon (2003, cited in Butt, 2007) later developed the Salmon line, which allowed the student's a tool to see how they were progressing using their own meanings about progression.

In contrast to the personal construct theory, trait theories see individual differences to personality as the fixed ways that individuals vary from each other (Butt, 2007). There are many types of trait theory, although this essay is going to concentrate on Eysenck and Rathman's (1965, cited in Butt, 2007) trait theory in order to critique Kelly's (1955, cited in Butt, 2007) personal construct theory. This trait theory was developed from the natural science and experimental mainstream approach to individual differences (Butt, 2007). The aim of the theory was to find general dimensions from various populations of individuals to allow trait theorists to be able to predict how, a certain individual would act in given situations.

Eysenck and Rathman (1965, cited in Butt, 2007) argued that personality traits were due to biological and genetic factors and used the dimensions of extraversion-introversion and neuroticism-stability to measure personality with (Butt, 2007). Eysenck and Rathman's (1965, cited in Butt, 2007) trait theory of personality used data gained from Eysenck's personality inventory questionnaire (Eysenck and Eysenck, 1963, cited in Butt, 2007) that involved many samples of individuals attributing dispositions to others (Butt, 2007).

Eysenck and Rathman's (1965, cited in Butt, 2007) research led them to claim that there were two, main, unrelated dimensions of personality: extraversion and neuroticism and that these were behavioural expressions of temperament differences (Butt, 2007). Eysenck and Rathman (1965, cited in Butt, 2007) claimed that extraversion was grounded in cortical arousal and neuroticism was grounded in autonomic arousal, so the behavioural patterns were like the phenotype in biology, whereas the innate brain structure is like the genotype (Butt, 2007). Eysenck reasoned that if the main dimensions in personality were found, these could have clinical application as they could be related to different kinds of neurotic behaviour which would explain why individuals acquire different types of psychological disorders (Butt, 2007).

So both theories give two different ways of viewing personality. This essay will now critically analyse the strengths and weaknesses of personal construct theory using the trait theory of personality. The trait theory has been around for a long time and therefore has been researched a lot, has been very influential and has been tested extensively; this is unlike the personal construct theory which has been around for a relatively shorter period of time and so has been lacking in the same areas. The trait theory has also been seen as a more suitable way than the personal construct theory of looking at personality as it resembles the lay theories that individuals use when assessing others (Butt, 2007). Trait theories also use objective personality measurements, like the Eysenck personality inventory and this allows for large groups of individuals to be compared. This subsequently gives trait theory a wide scope for application as the trait theory findings can be used by organisations that need to identify trends in

certain populations (Hollway, 2007). Personal construct theory data, in comparison, can not be generalised or compared across the wider population.

But trait theory has got its weaknesses. Skinner (1974, cited in Butt, 2007) argued that traits do not explain personality or behaviour; they just identify trends in it. Although trait theories were designed to see how individuals react differently and consistently in certain situations (Butt, 2007), Mischel (1968, cited in Butt, 2007) argued that the evidence for this consistency is relatively small compared to the evidence there is for how people change with experience. Mischel (1968, cited in Butt, 2007) also suggests that rather than entirely reflecting the individual's personality traits, trait theory is strongly influenced by the thoughts, experiences and personality of the individual rating.

The strength of objectivity within the trait theory, although helpful when comparing population, can also be viewed as a weakness of the theory. Personal construct theory data is subjective and situated in time and place unlike trait theory data which is taken out of its context making it ecologically invalid. The personal construct theory also takes into account the richness of an individual's personality (Butt, 2007) which the trait theory does not. Using phenomenology, personal construct theory attempts to see the distinctiveness of each individual's personality. Personal construct theory accepts that the individual can change and society can facilitate this change. This allows them to understand why individuals change depending on the situation and when that situation occurs and how this happens. Adaptations of personal construct theory also sees how change can happen in the future,

for example, Salmon's (2003, cited in Butt, 2007) version helped facilitate learning and her ' Salmon line' allowed individuals to give themselves a goal and see what they needed to change in their personality to reach that goal. The trait theory, however, sees traits as biological and therefore fixed and unlikely to change. This means that it can not be used to assist changes in personality so has less practical uses than the personal construct theory. Unlike the personal construct theory, trait theory also does not take into account how an individual's social life could influence the individual's personality.

A large strength of the personal construct theory is that it does not have the same extent of power relations plaguing it as the trait theory does. Personal construct theory uses qualitative interview methods which stop the researcher from having so much power over the findings of the research (Salmon, 2003, cited in Butt, 2007). The researcher uses the repertory grid to help each individual access their own personal constructs, in this way the researcher is prevented from assuming what the individual's constructs will be. Trait theorists, however, have lots of power over the individual. This is because the trait theory comes from the experimental approach. This means that the researchers that measure and put apply these measurements, for example, to create hierarchies in schools. Trait theory can therefore be misused as individuals can be judged against what is considered ' normal' and ' competent' by people who they believe are experts on the subject (Butt, 2007).

But, personal construct theory also has its weaknesses because they do not use classification methods like the trait theories do and therefore they can

not help an individual to get extra help, for example, if they need to be classified to get help with a split-personality. The personal construct theory also tried to make the researcher try to see the world through the participant's eyes in order to help the participant express their constructs. But sometimes this would be impossible for the researcher, especially if they are working with an individual with a personality problem that they have no experience of.

In trait theory there is an emphasis on the biological, genetic aspects of personality (Eysenck and Rathman, 1965, cited in Butt, 2007) which sees personality as fixed and coming from within the individual. But by concentrating on the individual and trying to find universal findings, the complexity and richness within each individual is lost. In education, psychometric measures have been used in such a way that teachers do nothing more than teach students how to pass tests. Salmon argued that testing students, learning becomes generalised and the student's ability level becomes fixed as students become grouped depending on whether they score high, average or low on tests. This does not take into account the individual personality of each student. In personal construct theory, students are no longer seen as fixed in their abilities, Salmon argued that children do not learn in the ways stated above, instead they shift their meanings within a personal system of understandings. In this way each individual student's personality could be such that they are good at and enjoy some types of learning and could be bad at and hate other types. So the personal construct theory has the strength of transcending the individual-society dualism.

The way trait theory sees traits as fixed, determined, genetic and unchanging through environments also suggests that individuals have no agency in their personality traits and social structures did not affect their personality traits whatsoever. In the personal construct theory, Kelly (1965, 2007, cited in Butt, 2007), for example, put great emphasis on the society that individuals are constructed in. People were seen to use their experiences to actively create their worlds, even though these constructs and understandings that were gained from the social world sometimes restrict agency. So the personal construct theory has the strength of transcending the agency-structure dualism.

Personal construct theory (Kelly, 1955, cited in Butt, 2007; Stevens, 2002) and the trait theory of personality (Eysenck and Rathman, 1965, cited in Butt, 2007) are two different approaches to individual differences in personality which contribute two different explanations to why people act in different ways in the same sort of situations (Butt, 2007). The strength of the personal construct theory is that it gives a much more detailed, holistic contribution to our understanding of individual differences in personality than the trait theory which sees personality as fixed and biologically determined. Personal construct theory sees individuals as having a fluid personality which changes through the individual interacting with their social world and so has contributed to individuals understandings of personality by showing them how they can change their constructions (i. e. the repertory grid). But, personal construct theory has a weakness as its findings can not be generalised like the trait theory can. So, although both theories contribute much to our understandings of individual differences to personality, personal

construct theory has a greater contribution as it is more holistic and recognises that the social world and the individual's agency play a vital role in personality which is something that trait theory does not (Butt, 2007).

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