Are people consistent in how they behave

Sociology

The consideration of behaviour being a consistent facet of people is an immensely large and highly debated topic. What does the question drive towards? Are people being consistent in their behaviour in all situations or in specific environments? What causes the behaviour, the situation or something within the individual actor? And what constitutes consistency; how is it to be measured? These are many of the questions that this essay will attempt to address in order to identify whether or not people behave consistently.

There has been great debate between personality traits advocates and those who support a more situationalist explanation of behaviour. This is explored and the conclusion of Interactionalism considered with regard to consistency of behaviour within an individual. Yet, other areas such as emotional development and attribution theories are highlighted to provide alternative perspectives to the question in hand. Behaviour has been argued to be the only objective and public human action, which can be observed, which in turn may affect the behaviour of others.

It is an understanding of what leads to this behaviour through which a conclusion of consistency can be reached. One nomothetic approach is that of behaviourism and classical conditioning within a learning paradigm. It was found that extroverts and introverts condition differently to a stimulus, in that introverts are more sensitive and condition more easily to the stimulus than extroverts, in tests such as eye-blink conditioning and lemon drop tests.

However, these tests are very simplistic and such a correlation cannot really be generalised to social behaviour, since social behaviour is not a

mechanical response to a stimuli. Another major perspective, which considers consistency of behaviour, is that of personality traits. 'Traits' are terms within everyday language to describe or differentiate people's styles of behaviour. However, there is a difference between the lay or pre-science conception of traits with that of the science of traits.

The latter has been carefully and strategically statistically analyses through psychometrics, such as correlation and factor analysis to fine-tune the tools for measuring personality traits within individuals (e. g. Eynsenck, 1969). Trait theorists argue that there is consistency of behaviour within individuals, the behaviour style or type impinging upon those traits, which an actor is said to possess. An early example of the use of trait theory is that of Adorno (1950, who strived to understand the rise of Fascism following the Second World War through the search for an 'authoritarian personality.

His major hypothesis was as follows: '... That the political, economical and social convictions of an individual often form a broad and coherent pattern, as if bound together by a 'mentality' or 'spirit', and that this pattern is an expression of deep lying trends in his personality. ' Adorno, 1950 Thus, the beliefs and ideology an individual has can express their personality traits, such as being authoritarian and conservative. However, if one scores highly on an authoritarian personality scale, will the behaviour be any different to those who do not score highly?

Do traits influence behaviour in this instance? A significantly strong correlation was found between 'Fascism score' and high level of obedience in Milgram's study into obedience to authority (1971). Characteristics of those

who scored highly on the fascism scale 'abhorred ambiguity' and did not resist authority, thus suggesting that they are less likely to challenge the experimenter as to why they should continue delivering shocks to the learner, and the orders of the experimenter were clear and authoritarian, such as 'you must continue. Suggesting that perhaps there is consistency in the behaviours of people holding certain traits.

Yet, the trait approach has been criticised from various angles, including from the situationalist perspective. Mischel (1968) argued that however consistent traits are as self-descriptors, they are very poor at predicting behaviours. Essentially, Mischel claimed that knowledgeable informants form trait-type conceptions of others, yet these concepts are greatly influenced by the semantic structure of language rather than being affected by situation specific information that would probably contradict traits.

Consequentially, informants do not have access to a language by which to describe others behaviour other than through the medium of trait concepts, which are inherently cross situational (Matthews et al. 2003; p. 40). Thus, personality does not exist in the form of cross-situational behaviour dispositions. Mischel draws support for this claim from the famous study by Hartshore and May (1928), where honest behaviour was tested for in children.

Children were given a test to complete under two conditions: one where the answers were on the front desk, but there was also a teacher there or when the answers were on the front desk and no adult was present. They found that the children cheated in the second condition. Does this mean that

children are inherently dishonest? No, merely that their behaviour was situation dependant and they could get away with the cheating behaviour. However, such an experiment would be deemed unethical today, so it is difficult to test for such traits.

Trait theorists argued that Mischel's claims were unfounded, since impressions are not formed from a single situation. Eynsenck's Extroversion-Introversion scale is not based on making predictions for behaviour from single observations but from many. It is only after observing an individual in many situations that individuals form impressions about people's habitual response patterns, which are intuitively correlated to produce trait-like impressions, Matthews argues (2003; p. 40). Yet, other perspectives and psychological theories undermine this claim.

Ichheiser, an attribution thinker, argues that we do not perceive people as they really are, since our perception of them is a construction. This is problematic for trait advocates due to the three biases Ichheiser argues are inherent in these constructions. Each bias and its implications shall be considered sequentially. Firstly, Ichhieser argues that there is an over estimation in the unity of the personality. How is it that although we do not see people in exactly the same situation twice, we can recognise their character or disposition?

The perceiver extracts invariance, and ignores or rationalises behaviour that does not concur with the perception of the actor's nature. Thus, different individuals may have different perceptions of an actor behaviour depending on the social role or relation the actor and observer share, such as a mother

and a best friend of a fourteen-year-old boy. Perhaps, it could be argued, that consistency of peoples behaviour is simply found within the perception of an individual actor who will overestimate the consistency of another's behaviour.

Secondly, the mote-beam mechanism, which claims that individuals are more likely to attribute certain characteristics to others - which are generally negative - but refrain from labelling ourselves with. This is problematic for the self-assessment scales used by personality theories, perhaps. Perhaps the type of introspection is not objective enough since responses will fit with an individuals self-concept and how they see themselves effects how they see the rest of the world (Kelly), yet this is constantly challenged and open to test.

There is a continual process of perception and feedback from the world around oneself, which can lead to change and development in one's behaviour. Finally, those who are successful are perceived as good. This could be linked to studies into attractiveness, and the assumption that attractive people are treated and judged more positively and as a result, this leads them to act more positively, a type of self-fulfilling prophecy.

Conversely, this could apply to less attractive individuals. Witkin et al (1976) conducted a study to investigate the assumed link between male criminals with XYY chromosome and violent crimes. 591 men were screen for the XYY chromosome, with only 12 cases being found. Although there was a relationship between criminal activity and the possession of these chromosomes, it was not correlated with violent crimes. Witkin argued that

the characteristics associated with the extra Y chromosome of above average height and low intelligence were not the direct cause of criminal behaviour, but the behaviour was a response to the social reaction to the individuals and they're self-concept.

Thus, social situation is important in this instance. Arguably, it could be said this contributes the development of criminal type traits as a consequence of social reaction, and there also does appear to be a consistency in the behaviour of males with the XYY genetic makeup, but also demonstrates how behaviour may not be consistent over time but amongst individuals of the same age cohort at a specific point in time. Yet, there is strong evidence for trait theory and what the main dimensions of personality are, as found in the 'Big 5'.

Fiske reanalysed the 16 PF and found there to be 5 main themes or traits through factor analysis and cluster analysis of the factors. The five domains are extroversion (traits include sociability, activity, positive emotion); neuroticism (degree to which one feels sad, anxious and tense); agreeableness (prosocial and communal verses antagonism); conscientiousness (following rules and norms, planning and organising. Has been linked to extroversion/introversion but extroverts can be very conscientious); and finally, openness (open to new experience, have a vivid imagination).

There has been much evidence to support the validity of the Big 5, and has proved as a very valuable tool. It has been argued that testing the veridical nature of traits requires a researcher to test how people act over a series of

situations. Here we return to the criticism trait theorists have in response to Mischel. In order for traits to be useful, generalisability across situations is important, but also, the situation must be relevant to the trait when testing.

Epstein (1977) asked subjects to rate and describe their positive and negative emotions, behaviours, impulses and situations for over two weeks. Low correlation between single days was found, as Mischel would have argued. However, when odd and even days were compared from twenty-four or thirty-four day periods, reliability ranged from 0. 4 to 0. 88, with a median of 0. 72. These are dramatic results, Epstein argued, since the usual finding for cross-situational reliability co-efficient was 0. 3.

Epstein argued that situation lists were not analysing the data in the appropriate manner, but in such a way only low co-efficient would be attained. Other perspectives can be used to support the notion of people's behaviour being consistent, such as developmental psychology. Attachment theory, first introduced by Bowlby (1950) argued that the initial bonding relationships and the quality of the relationship between the primary caregiver and the child is critical to how the child will grow and develop sociability and will affect their future relationships.

In order to identify the type of relationship a child shared with the primary care giver, who is often the mother, Ainsworth proposed the strange situation, which identified the child as normally attached, anxious avoidant or anxious ambivalent, with the latter two not being healthy attachments, with the child often growing to be insecure in future relationships. Grossman

conducted a longitudinal study to look for consistency over time in the child's attachments and behaviour.

At 6 years of age, the children were rated in an age-appropriate strange-situation, and re-assessed for attachment patterns. 7% were rated the same as in infancy! This suggests that perhaps one of the contributors to trait development is found in the developmental stage of life, and shows that there is consistency in temperament throughout the childhood years, but not necessarily predictive of consistency of behaviour in adulthood. However, it does appear that trait and behaviour can be considered without consideration of the situation. Mischel actually went on to develop trait theory to predict behaviour, which also considers context.

Rather than seeing trait as a causal agent or summaries of observed behaviour (Buss & Craik), Mischel argues that traits are the 'conditional probability of a category of behaviours in a category of contexts' (p. 41). Wright and Mischel (1987) asked raters to assess children on the traits of 'aggression' and 'withdrawal', and several observers watched the children over a period of time. Furthermore, raters were asked to rate how demanding the situation was for the child in relation to the child competencies.

Raters looked for behaviours, which were considered to have 'feature-centricity' - behaviour central to a trait, such as pushing for aggressive traits. The hypothesis was that children with high levels of a trait would display more feature-central behaviour, and that there would be a correlation between behaviour and trait, especially in highly demanding situations.

These hypotheses were shown to be correct, but also, feature-central behaviour was also evident in situations of low stress.

Arguably, therefore, traits can be highly predictive of behaviour, with the relevance of the situation making a difference to behaviour scores, and finally, there is a significant trait-situation interaction. From these findings, a new theory was proposed, the Cognitive Affective Personality System (CAPS). It is an Interactionalist model, not only considering traits and behaviour, but also goals, expectations, beliefs, competencies, and self-regulating plans and strategies as basic units of personality. Due to the nature of the interacting units, the outcome is a 'if... hen' form. For example, if I meet my friend, then I am friendly; if I meet my boss, then I am conscientious. Units are also subject to change as a consequence of social interaction. One may not behave in the same manner in a particular type of situation due to discussing their behaviour with another, resulting in a different belief or attitude change. Thus, CAPS suggests a very different view of consistency than trait theory, in proposing more personality units, whose control over behaviour is linked to specific situational features, on a person-by-person basis.

However, it does assume some personality stability, in that there is consistency in how an individual behaves in a specific situation with regards to a particular trait and experience, which stems from both biological and cognitive-social influences. There appears to be a fairly strong case for a certain degree of consistency of peoples behaviour, considering the range of evidence put forward, mainly by trait theory, but also a little by the Interactionalist perspective.

Kerrick and Funder (1988) provided five conclusions with regards to how the best predictive validity coefficients may be obtained from traits in psychological research. Multiple observers and multiple observed behaviours, which are obviously to obtain reliability with-subject and across the raters/observers. Thirdly, behaviours that seem relevant to the dimension in question, since some traits will not be 'active' in certain situations, such as extroversion may appear at a party, but not when marching. Fourthly, raters who are familiar with the person being rated.

This is problematic considering Ichhesiers arguments for over emphasis of the consistency of other's behaviour being a bias in the perception of others, therefore immediately increasing trait research to appear to demonstrate consistency in behaviour, when in reality it is the bias within the observer. Finally, the dimension must be one, which is publicly observable. This last demand is perhaps the most controversial. Some individuals may strive to appear consistent over situations and maintain a very solid public persona, through conforming to societal norms and values, although they may have different opinions in private.

Tajfel (1978) formulated the Social Identity theory, whereby there is dichotomy of social and private self. It is a theory of social categorization based on the concept of social identity, the part of the self-concept that derives from group-membership. Tajfel demonstrated that the two identities can have contradictory beliefs and behaviours. For example, a soldier who bombs a city in another country, this behaviour is not consistent with the personal identity he has when at home and reprimands his children for being aggressive toward each other.

Thus, an individual may be conforming to the expectations of a particular role but these may not be a reflection of their personality, which is problematic for trait theory. In conclusion, there does appear to be some degree of consistency in people's behaviour and it is important to consider the various factors contributing to the thinking behind an action, rather than reducing behaviour down to a single factor, such as personality traits.

In short, I feel Ender's (1983) rich conception of human behaviour is what should be considered and borne in mind when researching in psychology: '[Behaviour is] a function of a continuous multidirectional process of person-by situation interactions; cognitive, motivational and emotional factors have important determining roles on behaviour, regarding the person side; and the perception or psychological meaning that the situation has for the person is essential determining factor of behaviour. '