

What extent is
personality innate?



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Personality portrays a psychological construct applied to a set of overt behaviours, thoughts and feelings. There is much debate amongst psychologists on how to specifically categorise, define and measure the concept of personality due to numerous meanings and theories associated with the term itself (Carver and Scheier, 2004). Although no single definition is universally accepted by psychologists, a useful definition when discussing different theories of personality is that given by Gross (2010):

“[Personality refers to]...relatively stable and enduring aspects of individuals which distinguish them from other people, making them unique, but which at the same time allow people to be compared with each other.” (p. 663)

This definition emphasises that personality is an internal process; consistency and continuity of behaviour in addition to individual differences make it possible to describe people and predict behaviour. This allows an individual control over their environment and to make sense of the world and people in it.

The paper will consider innate characteristics of personality in terms of being genetically determined (inborn) in contrast to those acquired by learning or attributable to environmental factors.

The purpose of this discussion is to illustrate to what extent personality is innate from a Psychoanalytical and Phenomenological approach. The theorists, Sigmund Freud (Psychoanalytical) and Carl Rogers (Phenomenological) are widely accepted as two of the most significant psychotherapists of the twentieth century (Ziegler, 2002). Both theories are based on very different assumptions concerning motivation and personality

drives. This paper will evaluate and critique both theories; their theoretical contribution to motivations behind behaviour and to what extent an individual's personality is determined by innate characteristics.

Psychoanalysis was described by Freud (1923, p. 62) as a “ theory of mind or personality, a method of investigation of unconscious processes and a method of treatment.” The assumption that human motivation and behaviour is never accidental, but determined by biological, innate life and death instincts, termed “ Psychic Determinism” is central to Freud's approach. These deterministic, instincts are shaped during childhood, later influencing and determining an individual's personality (Mischel, Shoda and Smith, 2003). Freud's view coincided with evolutionary theories of Darwin (1871) observing a lack of distinction between basic human motivations and those of animals, assuming sex and aggression to be primitive human drives from which all other motivations flow. John, Robins and Pervin (2008, p. 64) state that “...there is nothing we can do but to try to adapt to them, enjoy them, or inhibit them when appropriate...” An individual would have little control over such drives rooted within their biological make-up.

A further assumption Freud made about personality, was the importance of innate, unconscious processes (Freud, 1938). Behaviour is ruled by primitive, inner unconscious processes that lie outside a person's awareness or control (Carver and Scheier, 2004). Instinctual, biological drives reside in the unconscious. These drives govern behaviour, directing a person towards choices that promise to satisfy an individual's basic needs. Freudian slips are an example of mistakes made, revealing a person's repressed wishes, feelings or desires. An ‘ accidental’ slip-of-the-tongue or a surrealistic dream

all have meaning and intent (Power, 2000). Freud used the embarrassing incident of his friend Dr Stekel to highlight this point in “ The Psychopathology of Everyday Life”. Dr Stekel extended his hand to bid a patient farewell only to find himself undoing the bow that held her gown together. Dr Stekel commented, “ I was conscious of no dishonourable intent, yet I executed this awkward movement with the agility of a juggler” (Freud, 1914). Stekel had little conscious choice over his actions, interpreted as having inborn, unconscious desires for his patient, revealed by the slip of his hand. The unconscious, biological drives are further explained by Freud’s Structural Model of Personality.

Personality has three categorised parts, each with its own motives and developmental progress. The “ id” operates in the unconscious and is linked to instinctual, biological processes which the individual has no awareness over. The id is the primitive core and is inborn from which the ego and the superego evolve. The “ Pleasure Principle” governs the id as the source of energy and impulses. Its needs and desires should be satisfied immediately regardless of reason or consequence. In order to discharge any tension the id forms an internal image of the desired response. A person who desires sexual relations with a friend may form an image in their mind of them together. This type of associative, non-voluntary thinking is called “ Primary Process Thinking” (Mischel et al., 2003).

Resistant to the immediate desires of the id, is the “ superego” representing the learnt conscience; embodying the morals and standards of family and societal values. Freud saw parents as having the largest influence over the development of the superego. The superego can be divided into two

subdivisions: the conscience which arises from rules about what behaviour is bad- the basis for guilt; and the ego ideal arising from rewards and what parents and society approve of- the basis of pride. Awareness of violation of the superego standards may cause an individual anxiety over loss of parental love. Freud also believed that a 'weak' superego could result in hedonism and criminality, such as stealing when hungry.

The "ego" mediates between the id and the superego balancing the demands of desire, reality and morality. The ego primarily services the id impulses which are unconscious governed by the "Reality Principle" (Glassman and Hadad, 2004), delaying gratification from the id until a suitable object or activity can be sought. Freud (1933) gave a description of the mind and the three parts of the psychic structure as always in constant conflict.

The conflicts that can occur can lead to three different kinds of anxiety: reality anxiety; neurotic anxiety or moral anxiety. Glassman and Hadad (2004) argue that Freud viewed anxiety as being biologically based giving an individual little choice or control over their behaviour and how a person may respond to threat or conflict. When anxiety or impulses are not dealt with by practical means, the ego calls upon several unconscious defence mechanisms to release the tension and protect the person against unpleasant ideas. Freud viewed dance, sport and music as ways of channelling impulses into acceptable outlets. The Strasbourg dancing epidemic of 1518 where nearly 400 men, women and children were seized by the compulsion to dance as a result of mass hysteria is an example of the

unconscious, innate displacement of anxiety due to high levels of stress (Waller, 2009).

Freud theorised that everyone shared the same basic personality structure and innate drives; useful when understanding events such as the Strasbourg dancing epidemic. However, conflict arises within the approach in understanding an individual's uniqueness; Freud explained this in two ways. Firstly, individual differences arise between each person's superego, based upon upbringing and values of different cultures. Freud also believed that failed development in the oral, anal and phallic phases of psychosexual maturity could result in personality differences and regressive problems in adulthood (Maltby, Day and Macaskill, 2007).

The Psychosexual Stages of Development, Freud's most controversial theory, proposed that child development progresses through a succession of five stages each related to an erogenous zone. If a child's personality acquires excessive satisfaction or encounters undue frustration at any one stage, the development of the personality may be fixated there (Carver and Scheier, 2004). These fixations often become the source of severe personality problems in later life, with a person often regressing to the fixated stage. Freud considered that most problems of adult personality could be traced back to childhood troubles. Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) can be viewed as a consequence of fixation at the anal stage, sexual pleasure is gained from bowel movements however, parents teach children to delay gratification through toilet training. Children of parents that overuse punishment when toilet training, could result in aggressive id drives and become messy and stubborn (Carver and Scheier, 2004). The obsessions in <https://assignbuster.com/what-extent-is-personality-innate/>

OCD, therefore, come from repression (ego-defence mechanism) and the longing to be messy, while the compulsions result from a necessity to control this desire and the conflict from within the mind.

In contrast to Psychoanalysis, Phenomenological theorists view people as experiencing individuals rather than suffering as a result of their unconscious, innate motivations and conflicts. Experience is the interaction of a person with their world and the feedback they receive from it. The emphasis is on conscious subjective experiences, interaction and understanding of the world. Essential to Phenomenological theory are the beliefs that everybody's experience is unique. Phenomenological theories have shaped the foundation of many client-centred therapeutic procedures on which current counselling techniques are based. Carl Rogers developed some of the core theories on this school of thought.

Rogers emphasised the importance of humans as being intrinsically good and having an innate desire and drive for self-improvement. Self-concept is essential to our experience of the world, and this develops from a child's perceptions of his parents' approval. The idea that we are accountable for our own lives and have choice and free-will over our personality was greatly exemplified in Carl Rogers's Phenomenological theory (Ziegler 2002). This was reflected in Rogers's article, "The Concept of the Fully Functioning Person" (1963):

"...the client feels within himself the power of naked choice. He is free-to become himself or to hide behind a facade; to move forward or to retrogress; to behave in ways which are destructive of self and others, or in ways which

are enhancing...We have the power to choose our destinies, even when fate deliver us into tragedy.”

(p. 25)

Rogers referred to a person's identity and personality being formed through a sequence of personal experiences, which mirror how the person is perceived by themselves and the outside world, the “ Phenomenological Field” (Glassman and Hadad, 2004). The Phenomenological Field contains both conscious and unconscious perceptions. The stimulating conditions or external reality is not what shapes our lives but our perceptions of it, expressed through our subjective reality are what guide our behaviour. Our individual constructs and hypotheses of the world help us anticipate and control external events. For example, we cannot know what another person really means when they say that they are in love. We can only begin to know by emphasising and relating what they say to their behaviour (Mischel et al., 2004). As a result, disagreements can only be resolved when individuals choose to see the other person's viewpoint. The reality people experience is expressed through the Phenomenological Field, allowing free-will over how one conducts themselves.

A central belief to Rogers' personality theory is the notion of The Self. Self is how we see ourselves, constructed from interaction with the surrounding environment, perception (such as body image, experience) and how we interpret experiences. The Self is our inner personality, it is primarily conscious, constantly evolving and dynamic (Ziegler, 2002). Two primary sources that may influence a person's self-concept are childhood

experiences and feedback from other people. Whereas Psychoanalytic theory views personality mainly as a product of innate factors and past childhood experience, Rogers argues that the past is only applicable to the extent that an individual perceives it to be (Glassman and Hadad, 2004). It is always possible for a new pattern to emerge. The self-concept does not necessarily always fit with reality, though, and the way a person perceives themselves may differ greatly from how others see them.

In addition to the Self, there is also another aspect of the Phenomenological Field: the Ideal Self. The Ideal Self is what an individual aspires to be like- the goals or the ideal created through the demands from society. Glassman and Hadad (2004) state that the relationship between the Self and Ideal Self are crucial in how we view ourselves and the level of control we perceive to have over our personality. The closer our self-image and ideal-self are to one another, the greater congruence and the higher the feeling of self-worth. A person assumed to be in an incongruent condition if some of their experience is unacceptable to them and denies or distorts their self-image. The Phenomenological approach would view the environment including other people as stopping an individual from achieving their full potential. According to Rogers (1959) client centred therapy would assist an individual in “...the releasing of an already existing capacity in a potentially competent individual” (Gross, 2010, p. 21). This implies that everyone has the potential and free-will to achieve what they desire, controlling their own behaviour with the freedom to pursue what they wish. Rogers assumes we each possess an inherited urge and positive ability to engage in activities leading to personal satisfaction and contribution to society know as the actualising

tendency. This is thought to be a tendency to develop and fulfil all of our potential. Self-actualisation is the single goal towards which we all choose to strive (John et al., 2008).

For Phenomenological theorists there is an innate drive to achieve self actualisation, the heart of our personality is essentially positive and aligned towards development through social interactions and ultimately self actualisation. An individual has the free-will to determine their own personality. In contrast, Freud believes we are solely driven by innate sexual and aggressive instincts and past experiences. Rogers believed that all people have a strong motive to be accepted. “ Positive regard” causes us to seek acceptance, warmth, and love from the valued people in our life. How we think about ourselves is determined by how others react or approve of us affecting our self regard which is also important in order to gain self actualisation (Glassman and Hadad, 2004).

Limitations apply to both the Psychoanalytical and Phenomenological approaches when discussing the extent to which personality is innate. The Freudian theory of the unconscious mind has never experimentally verified and remains a theoretical concept. Significant questions about what is available to immediate observation and what occurs unconsciously could never be entirely answered by Freud (Ekstrom, 2004). Freudian theory makes it difficult to evaluate the extent to which personality is innate because it makes predictions about unconscious states that can neither be observed nor tested scientifically (Eynsenck, 1986; Fisher & Greenberg, 1996). Freud’s work is also criticised for its originality as many of the

personality concepts were adopted from his peers who mainly studied adult patients with disorders (Andrews and Brewin, 2000).

Phenomenological concepts are also difficult to test empirically. They fail to describe what motivates or drives an individual to wanting to achieve self-actualisation and tend to ignore the unconscious. Contemporary cognitive science has since discovered that most human thought is unconscious, but not in the Freudian sense of being repressed (Ekstrom, 2004). A study by Faulkner and Foster (2002) investigated how the effects of brain injury may teach us a substantial amount about the relationship between conscious and unconscious process. It is also questionable as to what Roger's viewed as 'personality'.

This paper has discussed the extent to which personality is innate from a Psychoanalytical and Phenomenological approach. Both theories view personality as based upon some very basic assumptions and yet occupy opposing notions on human motivation and personality as innate. Central to Freud's Psychoanalytic approach to personality is "Psychic Determinism". Emphasis is given to innate, unconscious forces and instincts from within driving people beyond their control. The Structural Model of Personality is made up of three basic structures which is inborn with every individual. However, conflict arises in Freud's concept of personality as innate when understanding an individual's uniqueness. Individual differences can feature between each person's superego and as a result of the stages of Psychosexual Development.

Phenomenological theorists state there is an innate drive to achieve self actualisation, the core of personality is essentially positive and aligned towards development through social interactions and self actualisation. Roger's viewed people as experiencing individuals rather than victims of their unconscious motivations and anxiety. The emphasis is on subjective experiences, relationships and ways of understanding the world. Essential to this theory is the belief that everyone's experience is unique, and the individual's perception of the world is significant to their understanding and behaviour. Individuals have a choice to decide for themselves how they behave, what they may become and whether to act in a self actualising manner based on their subjective assessment of a situation.

Research in this paper has demonstrated that the Psychoanalytical approach view the individual as having little control over their behaviour, with personality driven by innate sexual and aggressive instincts and past experiences. The Phenomenological approach places huge emphasis upon an individual's free will to determine their own personality.

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