

“Trait theory is better at describing than explaining personality”
Discuss?

There are many different personality theories made by many different psychologists that attempt to account for individual behaviour. The scope of these theories are vast. They describe how genetic tendencies, biological mechanisms, learning, culture, family environment, peers, friends, sub-cultures(s), unconscious motivation, chance and measurement errors are all possible contributory factors for personality configuration. Amongst these theories lies Trait theory way of defining personality.

Trait psychologists regard the individual as being broadly describable in terms of a few key characteristics. There are a range of opinions in regards to how traits can be defined and measured and very little agreement as to what the basic trait units are. This essay will focus particularly around the work of Hans Eysenck (1967), Raymond Catell(1965) and Gordon Allport(1937). Their studies will be used with the intent to highlight that “Trait Theory is better at describing than explaining personality”.

Being that there are over 18,000 personality relevant adjectives in the English Language, it would be impossible for psychologists to use each of these words to describe each person. Trait theory shares an idea more than a well specified definition. These theorists attempt to simplify the vast array of adjectives.

Eysenck's trait theory drew on psychologist Jung's introvert and extrovert types. He used numerous groups of people to factor analyse data. Initially two dimensions of personality were proposed. These were (neuroticism-stability and extraversion-introversion). He later added a third dimension (psychoticism-intelligence). Each

dimension is composed of a cluster of traits for example, an individual high on one such trait will tend to be high on other traits in the cluster.

Catell began by removing any synonyms from this list of adjectives in his trait theory. He then rated a group of subjects and following that, factor analysed the data. From the data he produced 16 “primary factors” (source traits) which he listed in terms of their statistical importance. Examples from this list include reserved vs. warm and relaxed vs. tense. He also derived 5 “second-order” factors (surface traits), extraversion, anxiety, tough mindedness, independence and self control. All of this provided the basis for a very popular personality test.

On the other hand Allport viewed his traits as neuropsychological entities which he thought existed somewhere in the brain. He believed that every person has a small number of specific traits that predominate in his or her personality. He called these a person’s central traits. His approach was idiographic. The uniqueness of each individual is primary, and the study of personality should focus on this.

These theories prove that many vivid descriptions are available for us to be able to describe personality. However these theories merely touch in explaining personality. After all naming is not explaining.

Also most of the assessment devices that result from trait theory are self-report type test. In other words, the person being tested responds to questions and these responses may or may not be accurate. There is also a strong possibility that people can lie on tests. They may fake both bad and good results or purposefully manipulate findings to

their benefit. From these findings it is definitely fair to say that “trait theory is better at describing than explaining personality”.

Trait theory is also a poor predictor of future behaviour meaning that it fails to address a person’s state especially if that person falls on either the high end or low end of a specific trait. It also doesn’t take into account the very important factor of setting. It has been proven that there are obvious changes in a person’s personality when put in different situations. This is again more grounds to substantiate that trait theory isn’t accurate in explaining personality.

Another huge criticism of trait theory is that it does not address development. This is because it is based on statistics rather than theory resulting in no explanation of personality development. In comparison to other theories that argue for development in past, present and future, trait theory is stuck in the present which once again substantiates that is better at describing than explaining personality.

Because of the fact that trait theory offers little on development, it also provides little guidance in the changing of negative aspects of a trait. Basically we cannot change a trait without understanding how it develops. This results in many arguing over the application of trait theory being significantly reduced because it lacks the mean to change. What is the point in measuring something we can do nothing about?, more so can this explain personality?

As with most things in life trait theory is certainly open to interpretation. Different interpreters using the same observation techniques simultaneously may interpret the

individual as having different personality traits. This proves the inaccuracy in it being able to explain personality.

Hampson(1988) argued that because people's behaviour is not consistent,it can not be governed by unchanging traits.This is another aspect of how trait theories are often attacked for their poor predictive validity and reliability.