PERSONALITY TRAIT THEORIES

Introduction

Trait theories are concerned with what personality is made of, whereby Psychoanalytic theories deal with how personality develops. Human beings display an almost unlimited variety of personalities. Yet perhaps each is simply a combination of a few primary personality traits. Ascertaining what these primary characteristics are is a key objective of trait theory. A trait is defined as "any relatively enduring way in which one individual differs from another" (Guilford, 1959). This explanation highlights three assumptions underlying trait theory.

- First of all, personality traits are comparatively constant over time. For instance when James Conley (1985) compared the personality traits of several hundred adults at three different times in their lives, he revealed that extraversion, neuroticism and impulse control hardly changed over a forty-five-year period.

- The second assumption is that personality traits are consistent over situations. A person who is dominant at work is likely to be dominant at home and other surroundings. Trait theories presume that, on average, people will act in the same way in various situations. This view has been supported by research, (Epstein, 1983). For example, Nancy Cantor and her colleagues (1985) found that college freshmen used consistent strategies to pursue various aims as getting good grades and making friends. Some decided on a plan and followed through, working hard at their assignments and their social lives; others prepared themselves by envisaging worse case scenarios, in class and at parties. But none used different strategies for different goals; their approach to many challenges of the first year of college was consistent.

- The third assumption is that individual differences are the result of differences in the strength, number and combination of traits that a person posses. No two people are identical, but the differences among us are largely a matter of size. For example, everyone can be classified as more or less sociable. Sociability is best seen as a range, with extreme extroversion at one end of the scale and extreme introversion at the other. Most people fall between these

extremes. People who rate themselves high in sociability probably would enjoy careers in sales; people who give themselves a low rating perhaps would not.

Allport's Trait Approach: Gordon Allport was a pioneer in trait psychology. Allport believed that the words that people used to describe himself or she and others provided a window to personality. Allport found that when people are asked to characterize an individual, they tend to use the same or similar words, and these words fall into categories such as "honest", "outgoing" and "independent", he called these central traits. Allport believed that traits unite and integrate a person's behaviour by causing that person to approach different situations with similar aims or plans in mind. A person who is very competitive, for instance, will view a variety of situations as opportunities to "beat" other people, to show that they are superior in strength, intelligence or talent. Allport maintained that the way a person interprets situations depends on their inner disposition; in that different people respond to the same situation in ways that reflect their individual traits. He also believed that two people that have the same trait often express that trait in different ways. For example, one ambitious person may strive to achieve in the political world; another becomes a social climber and another is an athlete. Allport saw each individual as having a unique personality profile, regardless of any general traits he/she shares with others. He was referred to as an idiographic theorist because he maintained that individuals can only be partially understood by administering standardized tests and comparing the results to group norms.

Cattell's Research Approach: Raymond Cattell earned a bachelor's degree in chemistry before he turned to psychology; this background played an important role in his approach to the study of personality. Cattell believed that psychology could become as exact and rigorous a science as chemistry, and that it should be possible to identify the basic elements of personality, classify them in a manner similar to the periodic table and understand the general laws by which the elements combine. Cattell believed (like Allport) that the vocabulary that people used to describe themselves and others provided essential clues to the structure of personality. Cattell greatly expanded the database for trait theory, in the belief that if there are basic elements of personality, we should be able to find them by many different measures. Cattell found a solution in factor analysis, whereby people that were good at maths tended to be good at science based subjects and students that were good at English tended to be

good at History. He applied factor analysis to subjective ratings of peers (how people describe one another) in order to identify underlying or source traits. He used this information to devise questionnaires that were given to thousands of people of different ages and backgrounds. He also used several hundred "objective tests" to explore how traits might be expressed. Cattell concluded that personality is composed of sixteen primary or source traits, which he described in terms of opposing tendencies. Nearly all trait theorists credit Cattell for introducing this approach to the study of personality.

Cattell's Sixteen Personality Traits: (Pervin, 1987, p.306)

Reserved	Outgoing
Less intelligent	More intelligent
Stable, ego strength	Emotionality/neuroticism
Humble	Assertive
Sober	Happy go luck
Expedient	Conscientious
Shy	Venturesome
Tough-minded	Tender-minded
Trusting	Suspicious
Practical	Imaginative
Forthright	Shrewd
Placid	Apprehensive
Conservative	Experimenting
Group-dependant	Self-sufficient
Undisciplined	Controlled
Relaxed	Tense

Eysenck's Dimensions of Personality: Hans Eysenck (like Cattell) relied on standardised tests and statistics for assessing and comparing personalities. But Eysenck initially felt that personality could be essentially reduced to major dimensions (1970). One dimension is neuroticism versus emotional stability, the degree to which people have control over their feelings. At one extreme is the highly neurotic person who is anxious, moody, touchy, restless and quick to fly out of control. At the other extreme is the very emotionally stable person who is calm, even-tempered, and reliable and almost never falls to pieces. The second of Eysenck's major dimensions is extraversion versus introversion, the extent to which people are socially

outgoing or socially withdrawn. The third dimension is called "psychoticism: a lack of feeling for others, a tough manner of interacting with others, the tendency to be different and to defy social conventions.   He concluded that differences in personality have a biological basis, to test this hypothesis, Eysenck turned to the experimental method. He found for example that introverts take longer to fall asleep and are more sensitive to pain than extroverts, suggesting that their brains are somehow more alert. More recent experiments have confirmed Eysenck's biological hypothesis. These studies show that introverts and extroverts differ not in their resting or baseline levels of arousal, but in their response to stimulation or arousability (Stelmack, 1990). Studies of identical twins add further evidence that Eysenck's speculations may be on the right track. Inherited biological factors do seem to make a major contribution to individual differences along the extroversion-introversion dimension of personality (Shield, 1976).

New Research Theories: Both new research and re-analysis of older studies indicate that people of different ages, different walks of life, and even different cultures repeatedly and consistently refer to five major dimensions of personality. This trait model is regarded as a scientific breakthrough and provides psychologists with a framework for understanding and integrating research on personality traits and a set of broad dimensions to characterize the major ways that people differ from one another.

The Big Five: (Dogman, 1990; McCrae, 1989)

Extraversion	Socially active, assertive, outgoing, talkative, fun loving – the opposite to shy
Neuroticism	Emotionally unstable, frequent negative emotions (anxiety, worry, fear, distress), poor emotional control, irritable, hypersensitive – the opposite of well adjusted
Agreeableness	Helpful, cooperative, friendly, caring, nurturing – the opposite of hostile and self-centred
Conscientiousness	Achievement-orientated, dependable, responsible, prudent, hardworking, self-controlled – the opposite to impulsive
Openness to experience	Curious, imaginative, creative, original, intellectually adventuresome, flexible – the opposite of rigidity

Evaluation

Trait theory has been criticized because in contrast to the psychoanalytic approach, the trait approach lacks a theory of development. Personality is seen as static, even if the "Big Five" model is accepted there are still too many questions that need to be answered. Such as: Where do traits come from? Why does an individual develop one set of traits and not another set of traits? Can traits change? In the final analysis, trait theories are better at describing than explaining personality. This is an important part of the study of personality, but it is only a part.

Conclusion

The approach to personality, using the trait theory, is showing the way in which one individual differs from another, and trait theorists focus on this to explain consistency in human behaviour. Allport, adopted an idiographic approach, relying on case studies. Cattell used statistical analysis to identify sixteen source traits. Eysenck believed that their were only three traits and

they came from biology. In recent years, trait theorists now believe that there are five major personality traits, called the "Big Five".

Bibliography

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