

THE CONSTRUCTION OF PERSONALITY

An Introduction

Sarah E. Hampson

INTRODUCTIONS TO MODERN PSYCHOLOGY

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Sarah E. Hampson

*Department of Psychology
Birkbeck College
University of London*



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1 The Concept of Personality

A Definition of Personality

This is a book about the psychological study of personality, and therefore the first step is to provide a definition of this overworked term. In the past, it has had different meanings for theologians, philosophers and sociologists; and within psychology it has been defined in many ways (Allport, 1937). Rather than give examples of the diversity of definitions, which tends to be confusing rather than illuminating, we will begin by considering just one definition of personality considered acceptable by many psychologists today (Block, Weiss and Thorne, 1979): personality refers to *'More or less stable internal factors that make one person's behaviour consistent from one time to another, and different from the behaviour other people would manifest in comparable situations'* (I.L. Child, 1968, p.83).

In a few words, this definition manages to encompass all the important elements of a generally accepted definition of the concept of personality. However, the definition will not be given wholesale acceptance here, but instead used as a means of introducing the major issues that frequently arise as points of disagreement in the study of personality. These issues are found in the form of underlying assumptions which may be exposed beneath the deceptively straightforward exterior of Child's definition. The assumptions are revealed by the use of certain key words: *stable, internal, consistent and different*.

2 The Concept of Personality

Stability

The definition begins with the assumption of stability by stating that personality is *more or less* stable. It is not assumed that personality is *entirely* stable; the assumption is that it can, to a limited extent, undergo changes. Such a view allows for the possibility of long-term personality growth and change over the life-span and short-term fluctuations in personality from day to day. Nevertheless, these instabilities are regarded as relatively superficial when compared with the underlying core of continuity implied by the personality concept. The assumption of stability corresponds to our everyday experience: friends and acquaintances do not present radically different personalities on every fresh meeting, but instead are likely to be approximately the same from occasion to occasion. Even when we are taken by surprise by an old friend's dramatic new image, we are usually able to fit the new and old selves into a coherent whole, and to reassure ourselves that deep down the person is still the same.

Internality

The next assumption in the definition is that personality is *internal*: personality is located inside the individual. A corollary of this assumption is that personality is not available for direct observation. It can only be measured indirectly by making observations of that which is available externally. Thus on the basis of personality tests a psychologist will infer the presence of underlying personality traits which determine that person's test performance. Similarly, we make inferences about the personalities of our friends and acquaintances on the basis of observations of their behaviour.

Consistency

The definition goes on to state that personality *make[s] one person's behaviour consistent from one time to another*. The assumption that behaviour is consistent is one of the most controversial issues in personality. Consistency over time refers to the similarity between a person's behaviour on two different occasions. Everyday life is full of examples of consistency, from trivial daily routines such as the order in which you brush your teeth to more weighty matters such as which

way you vote in a general election. Personality is assumed to explain behavioural consistency because it is assumed to be a major determinant of behaviour and, since personality remains relatively stable, the behaviour it determines will be consistent.

Individual differences

Finally, the definition states that personality makes a person's behaviour *different from the behaviour other people would manifest in comparable situations*. It is a major assumption underlying the personality concept that there are individual differences in behaviour which are large enough to warrant investigation: people respond to the same situation in different ways. For example in even such a constrained situation as a lecture, students' behaviour will vary from sleep to furiously energetic note-taking. Individual differences in response to the same situation are assumed to be the product of variations in personality.

The definition of personality has been pulled apart to reveal four underlying assumptions, and it would probably be possible to unearth some more. It is important to remember that these assumptions are just that: they are assumptions rather than undisputed facts. For example, it may be quite wrong to assume that personality is essentially stable; it may be nearer the truth to regard personality as continually changing. It may be wrong to assume that personality is located within the individual; perhaps, like beauty, it resides in the eye of the beholder. Behavioural consistency and individual differences are assumed; but how far are people consistent from one occasion to another, and to what extent do they behave differently from one another in the same situation? If no empirical support for these assumptions can be found, a radical reappraisal of what psychologists mean by the term personality will be required. These issues will provide discussion points throughout this book although the weight given to each issue will vary according to the subject-matter of particular chapters.

Perspectives on Personality

This book is organised around three different perspectives on personality. In the present context, perspective is not being used metaphorically to mean theoretical point of view, but more literally to mean the standpoint from which personality is being observed and investigated. There are three perspectives from which personality has been studied: the perspective of psychologists studying other people, which has yielded psychological theories of personality; the perspective of non-psychologists, producing lay theories of personality; and the perspective from the standpoint of the self, which is concerned with the theories people have about their *own* personalities.

The personality theorist's perspective

From observations of other people, psychologists have studied personality, and developed formal theories to account for their findings; hence this will be referred to as the personality theorist's perspective. Personality theories typically consist of propositions concerned with three main areas: the structure, dynamics and development of personality (Hall and Lindzey, 1978). Propositions about personality structure are meant to specify more precisely the nature of the internal factors making up personality; the study of personality dynamics is concerned with what drives the structure to result in behaviour; and personality development has to do with the origins of the mature structure and its dynamics.

These three elements may be briefly illustrated by reference to Freud's theory of personality (which is dealt with in more detail in Chapter 8). First, the id, ego and the superego are the three interrelated systems which make up the structure of personality. Second, they are regarded as being in constant competition for control of psychic energy, which is the basis of the Freudian account of dynamics. Finally, Freud proposed that personality develops predominantly as a sequence of three stages, a sequence which is completed around the age of five years. These three stages are the oral, anal and phallic stages, their names deriving from the part of the body assumed to provide the major source of gratification during the particular stage. Other personality theories, such as Eysenck's

and Cattell's, are based on more objective observations of normal populations. The personality theorist's perspective is presented in Chapters 2 and 3 and is criticised in Chapter 4.

The lay perspective

The lay perspective refers to the widely shared set of beliefs about personality which are not generally made explicit, but which remain implicit and form the basis of lay or everyday theories of personality, theories which we all use in an informal and often unconscious way (Bruner and Tagiuri, 1954). Lay theories have become embodied in the language of personality description, e.g. we might be telling friends about a person we had recently met and describe this new person as 'warm' and 'friendly'. Our friends would have no difficulty in understanding this description and would probably infer that were they also to meet this person it would be easy to strike up a conversation, since the person would be likely to be 'sociable' as well. In short, we tend to believe that certain personality characteristics like 'warm', 'friendly' and 'sociable' go together, and we use these beliefs to make additional inferences about personality on the basis of limited information. These beliefs help us to simplify and organise our social world by enabling us to categorise people in terms of their personality characteristics in ways which then allow us to make predictions about their future behaviour. Lay personality theory is a form of general knowledge comparable to our knowledge about other aspects of the animate and inanimate environment. One does not need to be a biologist to know that dogs can bite, or a chemist to know that paper dissolves in water.

General knowledge about personality is of interest to psychologists for at least two reasons: first, in order to understand social behaviour it is necessary to understand the informal personality theories people use to categorise one another and to make predictions about additional characteristics and behaviour; second, the existence of the lay perspective raises the question of how it relates to the personality theorist's perspective. They are both perspectives on the same subject matter but how far are they the same? These issues will be considered in Chapters 5 and 6.

The self perspective

The final perspective to be considered is the self perspective. Psychologists have been concerned with the origins of our self-awareness (Mead, 1934), and the form in which our self perceptions are structured (Rogers, 1959). One of the most interesting issues raised in connection with the concept of the self perspective is the extent to which our self perceptions are accurate. While we may think that no one knows us better than we do ourselves, there is evidence to suggest that this self knowledge is not as accurate as we would like to believe. The self perspective is discussed in Chapter 7.

These three perspectives are not the only standpoints from which observations about personality can be made; sociologists, philosophers and theologians all have their own perspectives from which to think about and study personality. However, the three perspectives described here incorporate the main areas of psychological research into personality. Traditionally, these three perspectives have not been given equal weight in personality text books. Lay theories of personality and the self perspective are more commonly found in social psychology texts, but it is the intention here to show that the understanding of personality is enhanced by a consideration of all three perspectives and their inter-relations. In Chapter 8 the discussion of personality over the life-span will try to show how these differing perspectives work together to produce the impression of an enduring personality. In Chapter 9 we shall see how these perspectives contribute to the concept of a deviant personality.

2 The Personality Theorist's Perspective: Single-Trait Theories

From the personality theorist's perspective personality is typically regarded as internal and hence not directly accessible. It is made manifest in a person's behaviour and appearance; these provide the outward signs from which the internal elements of personality may be inferred. This inference process is not always accurate; for example, the nineteenth-century criminologist Lombroso believed that the criminal personality could be inferred from a variety of physical characteristics such as long arms and flat noses. The long arms were not for reaching into pockets, nor were the flat noses a consequence of such behaviour; both were regarded as inherited features indicative of a reversion to animals lower down the evolutionary scale such as the apes. However, Lombroso's outward signs of criminality turned out to be nothing more than the physical concomitants of severely sub-normal intelligence. Another example of the inferring of personality from behaviour is Freud's view that relatively trivial and usual behaviour like slips of the tongue or forgetting people's names reveal volumes about a person's underlying conflicts; but while Freud's interpretations of everyday behaviours may be fascinating, they are virtually impossible to put to the test.

Despite the dangers, the assumption that outward signs may be used for the inference and assessment of personality remains the hallmark of the personality theorist's perspective (Wiggins, 1973). It is assumed that carefully selected samples of behaviour may be used to measure a person's position on the underlying personality dimensions believed to give rise to the overt behaviour.

Interest in personality measurement developed as a result of successful attempts to measure another dimension of individual variation: intelligence. Since personality measurement started out with many of the assumptions and techniques which had proved successful in mental testing, it is worth mentioning these briefly here before moving on to personality proper.

Origins of Personality Measurement

Measurement of intelligence

Mental testing was first introduced at the beginning of this century by Binet in France. His goals were pragmatic: to find tests that would discriminate between children in schools in Paris, so that the duller ones could be identified and sent for special education (Herrnstein, 1973). He was not primarily concerned with the nature of intelligence but instead with producing ways of testing it that were sensitive to the range of individual differences in ability. If he did not understand the nature of intelligence, how could he be sure that his tests were measuring it? His approach relied on the fact that it is generally agreed that as children grow older they become more intelligent and within each age-group some children are more precocious than others. Binet used these two sources of information about intelligence as the yardstick against which to measure the success of his tests: they had to be able to sort out the younger children from the older ones and within one age-group they had to sort out the ones the teachers thought were bright from the ones regarded as dull.

Although Binet's approach to intelligence testing was pragmatic, subsequent researchers were not content to let the nature of intelligence remain an enigma. They noticed that intelligence appeared to be composed of a number of different abilities, such that a person might be more able in some areas than others. By studying the intercorrelations between subtests that make up an intelligence test it is possible to pick out separate groups of subtests in such a way that all the subtests within a particular group seem to be measuring the same ability, whilst the different groups of tests are measuring different abilities.

The statistical technique for isolating separate groups of subtests is factor analysis (Harman, 1967) which will be described in more detail in the next chapter. The pioneers of factor analysis in mental testing were Spearman and Thurstone. Spearman (1927) argued that intelligence involves two kinds of factors: a *general factor* (which enters into all subtests) and a *specific factor* (restricted to the particular ability being measured by the subtest). Thurstone (1947) proposed several general factors which enter into the correlations between subtests, and he developed a more sophisticated form of factor analysis to demonstrate the plurality of general factors.

Similarities between measuring intelligence and measuring personality

Personality testing has the same aims as intelligence testing: to distinguish between individuals and to make predictions about their performance in other settings. One of the major problems for personality testing is the lack of an obvious yardstick or criterion against which to assess the ability of the test to measure what it claims to be measuring. There are hundreds of ways of discriminating between people from their body weight to their taste in light reading and the problem is to decide which of these outward signs may be taken as an index of personality. Unfortunately the natural yardstick of age which is appropriate for intelligence testing is not relevant so far as personality testing is concerned.

While personality probably does change with age, it does not appear to do so in any straightforward way. We cannot say that 7-year-olds are 'less' extraverted than 9-year-olds. Nor is there an obvious group of experts, such as teachers, who might agree on a rank ordering of people in terms of personality characteristics. Instead, other less satisfactory criteria have to be used, as we shall see later in the chapter.

Personality testing inherited the technique of factor analysis for unravelling the structure of personality and thus also inherited the propensity to produce several fiercely disputed solutions to the puzzle; for factor analysis can be used in a variety of ways, and the final solution looks different depending on, for example, the choice of items put into the

analysis and the level in the hierarchy of factors with which the researcher chooses to work. These issues will be examined more closely when the work of Eysenck and Cattell is considered.

To summarise, personality and intelligence have a number of features in common. They are both psychological components of the individual which can be measured to reveal individual differences. Factor analysis has been used to investigate the structure of the psychological components assessed by intelligence and personality tests. Intelligence is fortunate in having both a natural criterion (age changes) and teachers' expert opinions against which to validate its tests; but those interested in measuring personality are not so lucky.

Single-Trait Theories

Single-trait theories are concerned with the role played by one particular part of the personality structure in the determination of behaviour. The most influential single-trait theories have been those which describe traits that enter into a wide variety of behaviours. Some well-known examples of such traits are Authoritarianism (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson and Sanford, 1950), the Achievement Motive (McClelland, Atkinson, Clark and Lowell, 1953), and Repression versus Sensitisation (Byrne, 1964). The ambitions of a single-trait investigator studying one aspect of personality are far more humble than those of the multi-trait investigator, who hopes to describe personality in its entirety; multi-trait theories such as those of Eysenck and Cattell are described in the next chapter.

When discussing the personality theorist's perspective, the terms 'trait' and 'dimension' will be used interchangeably to refer to an internal characteristic which is capable of distinguishing between individuals in the sense that it is believed to be present to a greater extent in some people than in others. The two single-trait theories and their associated measures to be presented here involve the traits of Field Dependence-Independence (FD-I) and Locus of Control respectively. These particular theories have been chosen because of the vast amount of research they have generated

(approximately three thousand studies between them — ample testimony to their popularity and influence). Reviews of these and other single-trait theories are to be found in Blass (1977) and in London and Exner (1978).

Field Dependence-Independence

FD-I is a dimension of individual variation which characterises an aspect of information processing. The relatively field dependent person is readily influenced by the environment and tends to incorporate information non-selectively. In contrast, the field independent person relies more on internally generated cues and is more discriminating in the selection of environmental information. FD-I has been the subject of extensive investigation by Witkin and his colleagues (Witkin, Lewis, Hertzman, Machover, Meissner and Wapner, 1972; Witkin, Dyk, Faterson, Goodenough and Karp, 1974). It forms part of Witkin's general theory of the development of perception and cognition in which he proposes that development involves the gradual shift away from the interpretation of the environment in a relatively global, unstructured manner towards a more complex interpretation in which the environment is perceived as consisting of many independent elements forming a detailed organisation. FD-I is sometimes referred to as a 'cognitive style' variable, since it is concerned with individual differences in information processing; but this does not mean that its relevance is limited to tasks we typically regard as cognitive, such as remembering telephone numbers or problem solving. The environment is also rich in *social* information, and this too requires selective attention and processing. It is thus not surprising that FD-I has been investigated in relation both to the more cognitive kinds of behaviours and to social behaviours.

Origins of the concept of FD-I

It is helpful to look into the historical origins of the FD-I dimension in order to understand the nature of this ubiquitous trait. It shares, along with penicillin and North America, the distinction of having been discovered by accident.