Katy Coleman (2020)

Essay for Personality module at Oxford Brookes University

Module leader: Mark Burgess

What is Personality?

Person-*ality* is to do with aspects of and influencing the person. In psychology, one does not possess a 'good' personality, this is value laden which Allport (1937) worked hard to move away from, settling on this widely cited definition: Personality is 'a dynamic organization, inside the person, of psychophysical systems that create the person's characteristic patterns of behaviour, thoughts and feelings' (Allport, 1961).

There exist many perspectives on personality and McAdams and Pals (2006) offer a definition including these: 'Personality is an individual's unique variation on the general evolutionary design for human nature, expressed as a developing pattern of dispositional traits, characteristic adaptations, and integrative life stories complexly and differentially situated in culture.' To understand what personality is, one must understand the psychological systems that make up its whole and how they interact with one another (c.f. Mayer, 2007).

Taking a specific example of recent behaviour exhibited by my eight-year-old daughter: I was in the other room when she took my phone of the table and keyed in my password, exclaiming; 'Mummy I just got into your phone with your password!'. This behaviour could reveal: her adventurous disposition (trait perspective); the learning of naughty behaviour from her naughty older sister (behaviourist perspective); the adaptation of adventurousness which aids survival of the species (evolutionary perspective); inherited behavioural genes (heritability perspective); she acted upon remembering the password, the affect of that action informed her subsequent cognition and subsequent behaviour (social learning perspective); an opportunity for growth in discovering about herself (humanistic perspective) and/or could reveal I had told her the password a month previously; she forgot it and remembered it during a dream (psychoanalytic perspective).

My daughter did tell me she dreamt my password then acted to confirm if her dream was correct. This explanation could seem the least credible, but why? Freud (2012) developed his psychoanalytic theory by studying dreams and mentally unwell patients and stated negative repressed memories can spontaneously return to consciousness in dreams or during psychoanalysis. This theory has received bad press, for example Ceci and Loftus (1994) state whilst real, repressed memories can be retrieved, quite often this retrieval occurs during

suggestive therapy that can cause false memories to occur. Another suggestive technique, The Rorschach Inkblot Test (Rorschach, 1921), is used as a diagnostic tool which West's (1998) meta-analysis found was effective in discriminating between children who have or haven't been sexually abused. However, Garb (1999) found West (1998) had not included statistically insignificant results in analysis and Wood (1999) separately highlighted problems with the test's validity. These inconsistencies throw doubt on the underlying psychoanalytic theory.

Famous behaviourist Skinner (2012) was strongly anti-psychoanalytic stating that problematic behaviour is caused by defective environments and the inner workings of the mind have no input into the scientific study of behaviour. However, Allport (1955, p. 18) countered; 'concepts derived from method can tell us only about method and nothing about the nature of man's being or becoming'. Skinner (2012) thought people's behaviour was shaped by contingencies of reinforcement within the culture in which they live with earlier contingencies having created that culture; extending this theory to the verbal community - the practices of which shape listener's behaviour (Skinner, 2014). In support of this, experienced clinical psychologists Hayes and Wilson (1993) used behaviour-analytic techniques as a therapeutic tool, including healing abuse survivors. They revealed survivors avoid self-knowledge of the abuse, but by reliving it through detailed verbalization the stimulus functions are present and can thus be extinguished. The therapist reinforces a different verbalization about the abuse, which changes the client's thoughts, feelings and behaviour in the world.

Bandura (1978) criticized the unidimensional aspect of psychoanalytic theory and behaviourism. In social learning theory, behaviour is explained by reciprocal determinism; people's behaviour affects their environment which affects their behaviour in an ongoing reciprocal process mediated by cognitive processes. This means people are bounded to some extent by the dictates of the environment and biology but have some control over their lives, pointing to the agentic perspective of social cognitive theory: Bandura (2001) described how acting upon intentions requires forethought, planning, self-reflectiveness and self-efficacy. People can be their own agent and create opportunities, the more opportunities created the higher probability fortuitous events will occur. This is starkly different to Freud (2012) who views an intention as an unconscious impulse, which can be forgotten before the intention is carried out because a negative motive interferes – this distractedness curable by psychoanalysis.

Freud thought people to be inwardly disturbed; Skinner thought people to be untamed beasts; but similar to Bandura's (2001) idea of being an agent, a sculpture, of your own world, Rogers (2015) believed people to be inherently positive with an actualizing tendency toward growth and fulfilment of potential. He was intrigued by the process of change; he felt Freud focussed on personality structure and development based on an unconscious reality of a person's past, but posited the past exists only as our current perception and this perceived reality guides behaviour. Rogers (1957) formulated humanistic person-centred therapy, during which unconditional positive regard from the therapist aids the client to reorganize their self-concept, achieving congruence with the actual, ideal and ought self. This reduces tension and increases openness to experience and positive expression of personal goals and values.

Openness to experience is one of the Big Five with neuroticism, extraversion, agreeableness and conscientiousness identified by Costa and McCrae (1992); they are basic personality dimensions, the degree to which they are exhibited forming a person's personality. John (1989) says these broad dimensions are unable to capture population variance, he called for a standard taxonomy of personality descriptors but noted the difficulty when words can hold different meanings. For example, my daughter's adventurousness could be a positive adjective within the openness dimension but a negative within the conscientiousness dimension. Even a working standard taxonomy doesn't seem able to capture unique personalities; Allport (1955) recognized the infinite uniqueness of psychological distinctions between persons and the need to go beyond averages and move toward a theory of personality growth.

Costa and McCrae (1994) don't entirely dispute this, they wanted to include three more aspects to Allport's (1961) personality definition: environmental influences, narrative biography and self-concept, but they critically note whilst people's goals, skills and behaviour can change they do so upon the foundation of traits; further positing personality development completes at 25 – 30 years of age. Roberts and DelVecchio (2000) disagree with this peak age; their review on longitudinal studies revealed trait consistency (particularly linked to strong identity achievement echoing Costa and McCrae (1994) who expect a self-concept link) increased linearly until ages 50 – 70 but even then consistency was .74 showing room for further change. Further evidence of room-for-change found in a heritability perspective meta-analysis; an average of 40% of personality was inherited, leaving 60% unexplained (Vukasovic & Bratko, 2015).

McAdam (2009) theorizes the Big Five are infused with moral meaning; humans are innately moral, we have evolved to *notice* these traits because of their importance in upholding society. He forwarded a view of personality as three layers: traits present at birth; scripts, schemas, goals, intentions and values as the second layer emerging in mid-childhood; then a narrative identity (the story of one's life), prompted by cognitive factors, emerging in adolescence as the third. Sheldon, Cheng and Hilpert (2011) built upon this with their Multiple Levels of Personality in Context (MPIC) model (figure 1). They conceptualized four levels of personality, adding psychological needs (based on self-determination theory (SDT), Ryan & Deci, 1985) on the level below traits and a further two levels placed above but seen to influence personality: social relations and cultures.
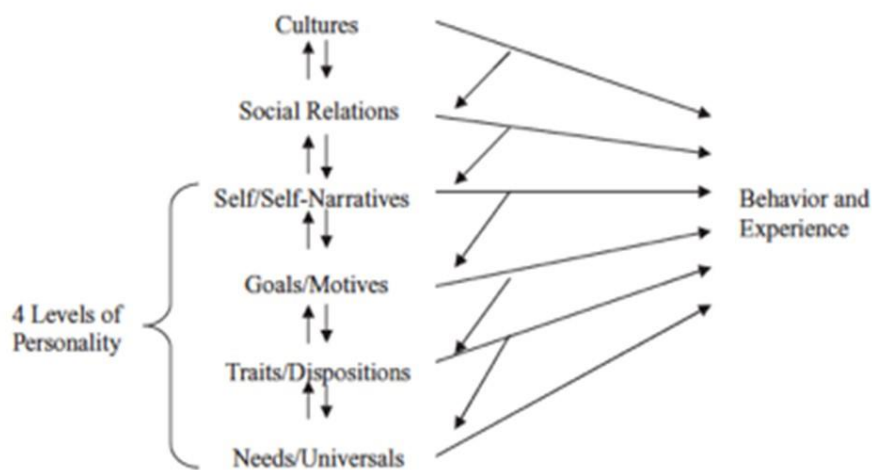

Figure 1. The Multiple Levels of Personality in Context (MPIC) model (Sheldon, Cheng & Hilpert, 2011)

In SDT, an individual seeks satisfaction of three innate psychological needs: competence, autonomy and relatedness; behaviours are positively and negatively affected when needs are satisfied or thwarted respectively (Ryan & Deci, 1985). In response to the MPIC model, McAdams and Manczak (2011) disagree with the hierarchical depiction, urging toward emerging, developmental layers in an interactive and fluid model.

So, what is personality? Personality is a complex construct explaining how an individual uniquely behaves and perceives the world. The explanation requires insight from different

theoretical perspectives and Figure 2 attempts to bring these into a unified Multi-Perspective Personality (MPP) model.
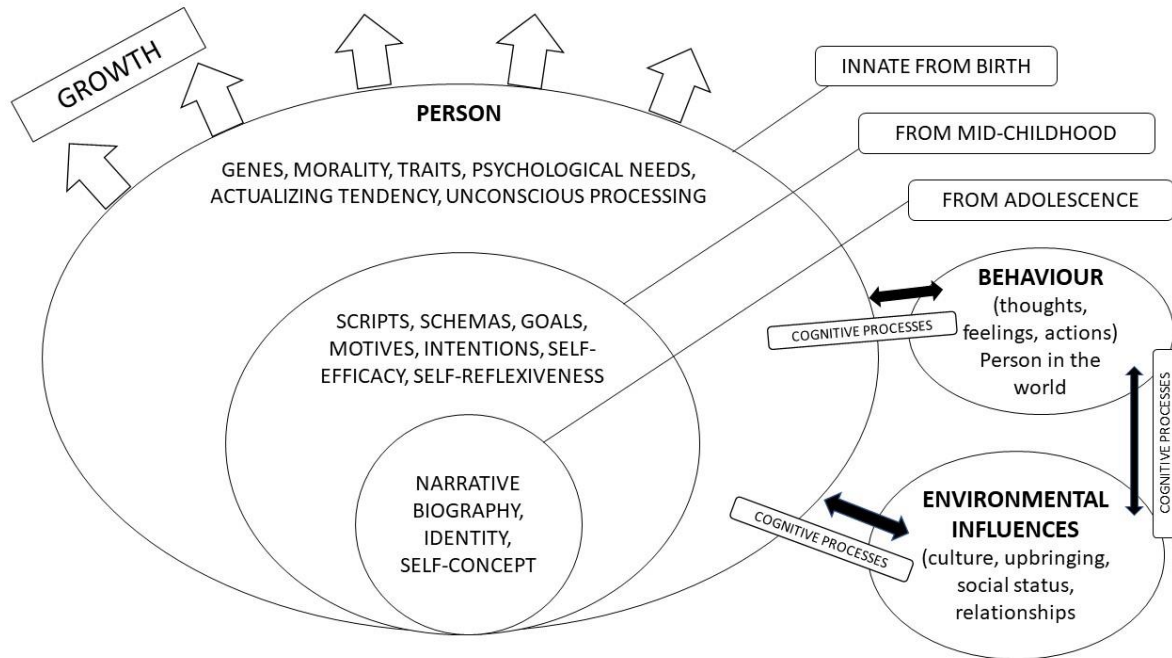

Figure 2. Multi-Perspective Personality Model (the researcher, 2020)

The MPP shows how person, behaviour and environment constantly reciprocally interact, mediated by cognitive process. The person is born with: innate psychological needs, a sense of morality and an actualizing tendency; genetic predisposition toward traits and other aspects of inherited personality; unconscious processing has already begun. By mid-childhood: scripts and schemas of how and what one should be are formed; goals, motives and intentions reinforce these; self-efficacy and self-reflexiveness give a foundation for identity. By adolescence: narrative biography begins - reinforcing identity and self-concept. The person continuously grows throughout their lifespan but personality change decreases with age; changes in any singular element (e.g. genetic expression, trait, ability to actualize, intentions, unconscious processing, self-concept) affect the whole developing person and the way they interact behaviourally with the environment and vice versa. Changes can occur via; therapy, acting with agency or the environment dealing a situation; but there will always remain the person's innate characteristics, tendencies, unconscious processing and importantly – growth of the person within and outside of themselves creating both stability and/or personality change dependant on the nature of that growth. Further research should include perspectives not covered in this essay, (e.g. existentialism) and studies exploring the developmental layers.

REFERENCES

Allport, G. W. (1937). Personality: A psychological interpretation.

Allport, G. W. (1961). Pattern and growth in personality. Holt, Reinhart & Winston.

Allport, G. W. (1955). *Becoming: Basic considerations for a psychology of personality* (Vol. 20). Yale University Press.

Bandura, A. (2001). Social cognitive theory: An agentic perspective. *Annual review of psychology*, *52*(1), 1-26.

Bandura, A. (1978). "The self system in reciprocal determinism." *American psychologist* 33.4: 344.

Ceci, S. J., & Loftus, E. F. (1994). 'Memory work': A royal road to false memories?. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, *8*(4), 351-364.

Costa Jr, P. T., & McCrae, R. R. (1992). Four ways five factors are basic. *Personality and individual differences*, *13*(6), 653-665.

Costa Jr, P. T., & McCrae, R. R. (1994). Set like plaster? Evidence for the stability of adult personality.

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1985). Self-determination and intrinsic motivation in human behavior. *EL Deci, RM Ryan.–1985*.

Freud, S. (2012). *The basic writings of Sigmund Freud*. Modern library.

Garb, H. N. (1999). Call for a moratorium on the use of the Rorschach Inkblot Test in clinical and forensic settings. *Assessment*, *6*(4), 313-317.

Hayes, S. C., & Wilson, K. G. (1993). Some applied implications of a contemporary behavior-analytic account of verbal events. *The Behavior Analyst*, *16*(2), 283.

John, O. P. (1989). Towards a taxonomy of personality descriptors. In *Personality psychology* (pp. 261-271). Springer, New York, NY.

Mayer, J. D. (2007.). Asserting the definition of personality. *The online newsletter for personality science*, *1*(1), 1-4.

McAdams, D. P. (2009). The moral personality. *Personality, identity, and character: Explorations in moral psychology*, 11-29.

Mcadams, Dan & Manczak, Erika. (2011). What Is a "Level" of Personality?. Psychological Inquiry. 22. 40-44. 10.1080/1047840X.2011.544026.

McAdams, D. P., & Pals, J. L. (2006). A new Big Five: fundamental principles for an integrative science of personality. *American psychologist*, *61*(3), 204.

Roberts, B. W., & DelVecchio, W. F. (2000). The rank-order consistency of personality traits from childhood to old age: a quantitative review of longitudinal studies. *Psychological bulletin*, *126*(1), 3.

Rogers, C. R. (1957). The necessary and sufficient conditions of therapeutic personality change. *Journal of consulting psychology*, *21*(2), 95.

Rogers, C. R. (2015). Rogers, Kohut, and Erickson: A personal perspective on some similarities and differences. *Evolution of psychotherapy*, 179-187.

Rorschach, H. (1921). *Psychodiagnostik: Methodik und ergebnisse eines warhrnehmungsdiagnostischen Experiments (deutenlassen von zufallsformen)* (Vol. 2). E. Bircher.

Sheldon, K. M., Cheng, C., & Hilpert, J. (2011). Understanding well-being and optimal functioning: Applying the multilevel personality in context (MPIC) model. *Psychological Inquiry*, *22*(1), 1-16.

Skinner, B. F. (2002). *Beyond freedom and dignity*. Hackett Publishing.

Skinner, B. F. (2014). *Contingencies of reinforcement: A theoretical analysis* (Vol. 3). BF Skinner Foundation.

Vukasović, T., & Bratko, D. (2015). Heritability of personality: a meta-analysis of behavior genetic studies. *Psychological bulletin*, *141*(4), 769.

West, M. M. (1998). Meta-analysis of studies assessing the efficacy of projective techniques in discriminating child sexual abuse. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, *22*(11), 1151-1166.

Wood, J. M., & Lilienfeld, S. O. (1999). The Rorschach Inkblot Test: a case of overstatement?. *Assessment*, *6*(4), 341-351.