Personal construct theory's contribution to our understanding of individual differences in personality

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Understanding the differences in personality between individuals and their behavioural consequences does seem to be at the heart of psychology. Personal Construct Theory (PCT), an important approach to studying personality differences, will be presented. PCT is rooted in the hermeneutic epistemology and aims to capture individual meanings and understandings. After a brief outline of behaviourist ideas about individual differences, PCT will be contrasted to trait theory, which is based in the scientific epistemology and devises and applies psychometric tests in order to evaluate individuals according to normative standards. It will be argued that PCT made an important contribution by emphasizing agency and by radically challenging the power relations inherent in traditional personality assessment based on traits. It will also be discussed how PCT departs from trait theory's individualistic focus by incorporating social determinants of individual differences in personality.

Personal construct theory was developed by Kelly (1955; as cited in Butt, 2007) in a clinical context, its aim was to provide a basis for understanding clients and helping them to resolve psychological distress. The approach can be placed in the humanistic tradition with its emphasis on the belief of the individual's power to develop his personality, instead of being driven by uncontrollable subconscious forces, as posited by the psychoanalytic tradition (Stevens, 2007). Kelly based his theory on a view of the person as operating like a scientist who develops theories about the world and himself from his own experiences. These theories are the individual's 'personal constructs', they serve as reference frame to make sense of events and to guide behaviour. Kelly developed and applied a method called 'repertory grid' which was used to elicit the structure of personal constructs by asking a client to compare and contrast a number of elements of his world.

For example, the client would be asked to make a list of important other persons and find ways in which two of them are similar, but different from a third. The client might say that his brother and best friend are similar in that they are easily aroused, while a colleague is different because he always stays calm. This would result in a personal construct with the two poles 'easily aroused – calm', representing one aspect of this person's way to categorize other people. The variety of bipolar constructs can be further analysed and condensed to reveal the structure of that person's way to make sense of others. In a therapeutic setting, this might be the starting point to address interpersonal issues which cause distress to the client (Stevens, 2007). This illustrates that the focus of personal construct theory is on exploring and understanding individual meaning making. Personality is conceived as the sum of personal constructs, and individual differences in personality result from the different ways in which people make sense of their environment.

This view can be contrasted to the behaviourist conception of personality, which is based on a different ontology. According to behaviourism, hypothetical constructs inside the person are not valid objects of study. Instead, personality can and must be inferred from observation of behaviour (Butt, 2004). Behaviour is then explained with reference to the 'Stimulus-Response' (S-R) paradigm. Consistent behavioural patterns result from a reinforcement history in which the environment provides stimuli and positive or negative reinforcement to the behavioural responses of the person. Individual differences in personality as expressed in behaviour are the consequence of different situational stimuli and different reinforcement histories (Eysenck and

Rachman, 1965; as cited in Butt, 2007). With its emphasis on the importance of environmental influences for the development of personality, the behaviourist perspective can thus be firmly located on the 'nurture' side of the nature-nurture debate.

Trait theorists like Eysenck and Rachman, on the other hand, posited the existence of an intervening organism between stimulus and response (S-O-R paradigm), and the usefulness of the 'personality' concept to explain individual differences in behaviour. Like behaviourism, Eysenck's approach is rooted in the scientific epistemology, seeking for objective knowledge and causal explanations, but using an alternative explanation for individual differences in personality: Eysenck emphasized hereditary factors, which places his trait theory on the 'nature' end of the nature-nurture discussion. The basic idea of trait theory is that personality can be described with reference to a number of traits, and individual differences in personality arise from different individual levels on each trait dimension. Personality is thus conceptualized as the sum of traits. For example, Eysenck's model posited 2 traits or personality factors: Extraversion, how far a person is outgoing or withdrawn, and Neuroticism, indicating the lability or stability of the person's emotions (Eysenck and Rachman, 1965; as cited in Butt, 2007).

The trait approach was developed in the psychometric tradition. A large number of trait ratings of real persons, based on a broad variety of natural language personality descriptions like 'sociable', 'talkative' or 'controlled', were obtained and then condensed into higher-order personality traits by applying factor analysis to find correlations and group the trait descriptions into clusters. Eysenck then linked the personality traits to neurobiological processes determined by genetic factors (Butt, 2004). From evidence of learning and perceptual tasks, he concluded that a person's degree of extraversion was related to his or her general level of cortical arousal as determined by ARAS, the 'ascending reticular activation system'. Eysenck further theorized that extraverts were relatively low in arousal and thus seeking stimulation, while introverted persons had a high default arousal level and therefore avoided further stimulation. The neuroticism versus emotional stability trait was related to autonomic arousal, regulated in the brain's limbic system which determined how quickly a person was aroused and how long it took them to get back to a resting state. Individual differences in personality traits are thus seen as caused by neurobiological processes which in turn are determined by the genetic makeup of the person.

The preceding discussion illustrated how both behaviourism and trait theory emphasize structural determinants of individual differences in personality: For behaviourists, personality is expressed in consistent behavioural patterns, which have been shaped by environmental factors, while for trait theory, personality results from genetic factors through their influence on cortical and autonomic arousal. These accounts do not leave much room for the concept of an autonomous individual with conscious control over his own behaviour, which points to an important difference from personal construct theory and to one of its major strengths, the emphasis on agency. Kelly was convinced that an individual had the power to change, and this was achieved in clinical practice by helping to restructure a personal construct system which may have been maladapted and therefore caused distress. The term 'constructive alternativism' denoted the idea that there are an infinite number of ways to construct and make sense of the world (Butt, 2001).

This opened up the way for the individual to change his understanding of the world and to consciously develop his own personality into new directions. So PCT placed the emphasis on understanding the individual, rather than classifying and comparing personality in terms of trait dimensions. In clinical practice, seemingly irrational or self-defeating behaviour may become understandable and changeable, if personal constructs are taken into account. This is in stark contrast to Eysenck's diagnostic approach which would start out by an assessment of

extraversion and neuroticism traits of the client and then tailor therapy accordingly. But with a belief in genetic determination of personality, possibilities for change are conceived as limited.

But the presumed objectivity of trait theory's personality assessment based on standardized measurement instruments can be questioned. The traits have been gained based on observers' ratings of other people's behaviour and thus reflect the raters' attributions of causes to events (Butt, 2004). Attributions have been shown to be biased by the fundamental attribution error (FAE), the tendency for observers to attribute dispositional, rather than situational, causes to others' behaviour. Research has shown that ratings of well-known persons, as opposed to ratings of persons after only brief exposure without interaction, generated the same cluster of traits. This suggests that ratings, and thus the traits gained from them through factor analysis, reflect pre-conceived judgements and prejudices of the raters, rather than inherent personality characteristics of the observed. Consequently, trait theory's advantage of enabling rapid classification based on standardized measurement instruments converses into a weakness, that of being a method for categorizing people according to societally shared preconceptions about personality (Butt, 2004).

A further problem with the psychometric approach lies in the evaluative loading of the concepts it uses to characterize personality. For example, the 'authoritarian personality', characterized by mental rigidity and preference for hierarchical organisations, was seen as representative for the mentality which made Nazi atrocities possible, thus had a very negative connotation. But after the Korean War with its concerns related to 'brainwashing' of American war prisoners by the Chinese, characteristics as 'resistance to persuasion' came to be seen as desirable, although they related to the same principle of mental rigidity (Richards, 2002). Similarly, assessing a label of 'high in neuroticism' in clinical context bears sufficiently negative evaluations, contributing to the stigmatization of the so labelled individuals. This points to the immense power that is inherent in labelling people, for example using personality assessment questionnaires that result in a job applicant being employed or rejected, a child being classified as apt for higher education or more suited to learn a manual profession, or a person in distress diagnosed with an emotional disorder requiring treatment. All this expresses a highly unequal power relation in favour of those doing the judgement.

Personal construct theory has a different approach, as it is not interested in labelling persons to assess their suitability for some predefined purpose, but instead aims to understand their individuality to enable them to achieve self-defined progress. Phillida Salmon (2003; as cited in Butt, 2007) has illustrated the possibilities of personal construct theory in educational settings. In her work, the predominant 'market model of education' which sees learning as absorption of pre-packaged bits of information, is contrasted to a view of learning as highly complex process which develops in interaction and can represent intense challenges to personal values of learners. She developed a very intuitive concept called the 'Salmon Line' as a technique to elicit implicit understandings about social situations, which formed the basis for individual development. For example, the Salmon Line was used to develop individualized learning projects for young people serving a 1-year sentence in an Intermediate Treatment Centre. By focusing on individual understandings and not attempting to measure individuals according to standardized criteria, personal construct theory thus challenges power relations inherent in traditional ways of personality assessment.

Despite these strengths, personal construct theory also has some weaknesses. Butt pointed to the tendency for 'reification' of personal constructs, denoting the danger to assume that those hypothetical objects elicited by repertory grid methodology and other techniques have some fixed and tangible existence inside the person's mind (Butt, 2001). In this respect, PCT runs the

risk of coming close to psychometric approaches which exhibit a similar tendency to believe in the existence of the things that are measured, which may not in all cases be justified (Richards, 2002). A further weakness may be seen in the basic assumption of PCT that people do the thinking first before acting, which not reflect real-world behaviour, if seen in light of observations about the typical speed in which human interaction takes place (Butt, 2001). This is nicely captured in Mead's statement "*We are aware of ourselves, and of what the situation is, but exactly how we will act never gets into experience until after the action takes place*" (1934; as cited in Butt 2001, p. 87).

It may also be considered a weakness that PCT does not extensively theorize how personal constructs develop. But in his discussion of the social aspects in personal construct theory, Butt (2001) showed how PCT departs from trait theory's individualistic view of the person, in that it assumes that personal constructs are developed and maintained in social interaction. While Eysenck's trait theory sees individual differences in personality as caused by autonomous internal factors (the trait-determining genes), PCT acknowledges the role of the social context in shaping individual understandings, and also by increasing the likelihood for similarity in constructs between individuals living in similar societies. PCT thus gives much more room for societal influences on individual differences in personality than trait theory, while at the same time emphasizing the individual's power to resist structural limitations by exerting agency.

To conclude, personal construct theory has made important contributions to our understanding of individual differences in personality, in that it opened up a way to explore the uniqueness of an individual's meaning making of the world, rather than categorizing individuals according to normative trait dimensions. The apparent weakness of PCT in its limited applicability for personality assessment in organizational and clinical settings is turned into a strength once the implications for power relations, individual agency and the individual's position in society are appropriately evaluated. PCT promotes a view of personality as shaped by societal forces, while at the same time empowering the individual to reconstruct himself and his being in the world.

(2176 words)

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