PERSONALITY THEORIES: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Omoregbe Omorodion and Festus Osayande

Abstract

Personality is a growing and dynamic entity that influences the behavior of people, and one of the objectives of organizational leaders is to ensure that they manage the resources at their disposal, especially human resources, to achieve organizational goals in the most effective and efficient manner. However, human beings are very complex; owing to the discrepancies in personalities. This paper provides an appraisal of the various theories of personality. These theories tend to have two things in common: they attempt to explain and understand the characteristics, traits and behavioral tendencies that are shared by individuals, also, personality theories also attempt to explain the differences in observable individual personalities. Lastly, the theories are not without criticisms. Psychoanalytic theory explains hidden personality dynamics rather than searching for identifiable patterns of behavior that describe basic dimensions of personality. The criticism underlying the evaluation of trait personality is that personality traits are not stable and enduring and is ever-changing, tailored to the particular role or situation. Some psychologists believe that the humanistic theory concepts are vague and subjective that they are not scientific description of personality rather a description of personal values and ideals of the school of thought. The social-cognitive perspective focuses so much on the situation that it fails to appreciate the person’s inner traits. Seldom in life does a single perspective on any issue give a complete picture of another human being. Human personality reveals its different aspects when it is viewed from different perspectives, and each perspective can enlarge our vision of the whole person and helps in the management of organizational staff.

The type of organization existing in a society defines the development of such a society. The development of the society or an organization is inherent in the behavior of the people that live in such a society. The ways humans perceive, learn, remember, think, feel, and develop are linked to personality. The individual personality is the characteristic pattern of thinking, feeling, and acting. Personality influences the behavior of people. If a behavior pattern is strikingly distinctive and consistent – one is likely to have “strong” personality. Personality is seen in individual differences, as it shapes how people interpret and react to events, and help to create situations to which we react.

Several factors have been considered to be responsible for determining or shaping an individual’s personality. Robbins & Judge (2009) opined that personality is not determined by one factor only, such as nature or nurture, but it is believed to be generally shaped by nature (heredity), nurture (environment) and situational conditions. Research findings on temperaments by Buss & Plomin (1975) showed that such activities as emotionality, sociability and impulsivity are inherited.

This study examines Personality by looking at eclectic definitions of the concept, appraise the theories of personality by evaluating the four major perspectives on personality. Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theory, which proposes that childhood sexuality and unconscious motivations influence personality; the trait perspective, in which researchers identify personality dimensions that account for our consistent behavior patterns; the humanistic approach, which focuses on our inner capacities for growth and self-fulfillment. Lastly, the social-cognitive approach, which emphasizes how we shape and are shaped by our environment and implications of the study to managers.
Personality Defined

Oladele (2005) defined personality as the unique and distinctive characteristics which set a person apart from another. In other words, personality includes outward expression of various inner conditions and processes such as intelligence, attitudes, interests, and motives. In a like mind, Goldberg (1993) stated that personality also includes one’s observable traits such as politeness, submissiveness, shyness, friendliness, talkativeness, initiative and so on. In the views of Myers (2001), personality is an individual’s characteristic pattern of thinking, feeling, and thinking. To Eysenck & Eysenck (1963), personality is more or less stable and an enduring organization of a person’s character, temperament, intellect and physique which determine his unique adjustment to his environment.

From the above considerations, one can accept that personality is an integrated and organized self-concept, self-attitudes, self-values, ambitions and all behavioral dispositions peculiar to an individual as a unique being or person. Personality is the projection of individuals to others. It is not what we think ourselves to be like, but ourselves as others see us.

In the views of Mukherjee (2000), the word ‘personality’ refers to the integrated and dynamic organization of the physical, mental, and special qualities of the individual, as that manifests itself in other people in social intercourse. However, this definition of the term personality seems to include a wide range of behavior aspects of the individual, each of these aspects being integrated to manifest in dynamic organization relating to interpersonal behavior of the individual. Considering the above premise of the broad definition of personality, it is no wonder that various theories of personality have been formulated from time to time to explain particular aspects of the personality ‘pie’ by various psychologists.

Approaches to Personality

Personality theories have chiefly been concerned with the factors that determine and explain different individuals' personalities as they are, and the factors which have brought about the given personality (Gendil, 2010). To that effect, many theories of personality have been developed.

However, these theories tend to have two things in common: First, the theories attempt to explain and understand the characteristics, traits and behavioral tendencies that are shared by individuals. In the views of Swanda (1979), this common feature of personality theories is called the core of personality. Gendlin (2010) opined that the core of personality is relatively stable throughout a person’s life time and it has an extensive influence on the behavior of individuals in the society, and that the core of personality is not learnt but are inherited. Secondly, personality theories also attempt to explain the differences in observable individual personalities. Swanda (1979) called this the periphery of personality. It contains attributes that are generally learnt rather than being inherited by individuals.

The Psychoanalytic Perspective

Psychoanalysis is Freud’s theory of personality that attributes our thoughts and actions to unconscious motives and conflicts; the techniques used in treating psychological disorders by seeking to expose and interpret unconscious tensions (Myers, 2001). The basic concepts in Freudian writings are libido, cathexis, sexuality, defense and control mechanisms (Mukherjee, 2000). Libido is an instinctive drive which arises from a source and aims for a goal for its satisfaction. The manner in which the drive is channeled is called cathexis. Sexuality has got connotations in Freud’s understanding, which is beyond the normal usage of the word. For any libidinal drive to be satisfied, the goal is to be attained. If the drive is restrained or blocked due to some pressure or social restraint, then it will be manifested in some form of defense behavior of the individual as the original idea will
be repressed (Gendlin, 2010). Repression is thus the cornerstone of all defense mechanisms of the individual, and it is always accompanied with some displaced behavior.

Underlying Freud’s psychoanalytic conception of personality was his belief that the mind is like an iceberg – mostly hidden. Our consciousness awareness is the part of the iceberg that floats above the surface. Below the surface is the much larger, unconscious region containing thoughts, feelings, and memories, of which we are largely unaware. Some of these thoughts are store temporarily in a preconscious area, from which we can retrieve them into conscious awareness. Of greater interest to Freud was the mass of unacceptable passions and thoughts that he believed we repress, or forcibly block from our consciousness because they would be too unsettling to acknowledge. Freud believed that, although we are not consciously aware of them, these troublesome feelings and ideas powerfully influence us. In his view, our unacknowledged impulses express themselves in disguised forms – the work we choose, the beliefs we hold, our daily habits, our troubling symptoms. In such ways, the unconscious seeps into our thoughts and actions (Hunsley & Bailey, 1999).

For Freud the determinist, nothing was ever accidental. He believed he could glimpse the seepage of the unconscious not only in people’s free associations, beliefs, habits, and symptoms but also in their dreams and slips of the tongue and pen. By analyzing people’s dreams, Freud believed, he could reveal the nature of their inner conflicts and release their inner tensions (Myers, 2001).

**Personality Structure and Development of the Psychoanalytic Theory**

Psychoanalytic theory explains human behavior in terms of the interaction of various components of personality. In Freud’s view, human personality – including its emotions and strivings – arises from a conflict between our aggressive, pleasure-seeking biological impulses and the internalized social restraints against them. Personality is the result of the efforts to resolve this basic conflict – to express these impulses in ways that bring satisfaction without also bringing guilt or punishment.

Freud theorized that the conflict centers on three interacting systems undergone by a child: id, ego, and superego. These abstract psychological concepts are are according to Freud, ‘useful aids to understanding’ the mind’s dynamics (Myers, 2001:245).

Id stage roughly corresponds with the age period from birth to about two years, and it manifests in uncivilized behavior pattern of the neonate (Oladele, 2005). Idistic child is impulsive, and his libidinal drives need immediate gratification. A child at the ego stage experiences his world of reality from two years of age to about four years. The development of superego of a child takes place along his age period from about four years to that of about six years. The goals of superego of a child are determined and dictated by his social values, and that explains why superego of a child is sometimes equated with his ‘conscience’.

The development of personality tries to explain how personality is formed in an individual. Psychoanalytic personality development explains the various stages of developments that personality passes through within the individual until it becomes fully developed. Freud believed that humans are sexual throughout childhood. Personality is formed during life’s first few years. Freud (1935) as cited in Myers (2001) opined that children pass through a series of psychosexual stages during which the id’s pleasure-seeking energies focus on distinct pleasure-sensitive areas of the body called erogenous zones and he proposed five psychosexual stages of personality development:

During the oral stage, the development of dependency, which lasts throughout the first 18 months, the infant’s sensual pleasures focus on sucking, biting, and chewing. If the child is well cared for, he is gratified and his learning from his gratification is one of trust or dependency. It is postulated
that individuals with this sort of happy experience eventually grow up to be dependent and trustful of others. Another feature of oral behavior, especially weaning, is that of aggressiveness, and it is manifested in biting. Myers (2001) opined that later forms of oral aggressive behavior are seen in adult sarcasm, ridicules, etc. This implies that proper care in rearing children at this stage may lead to the desired behavior in their personality.

During the anal stage, the origin of possessiveness, from about 18 months to 3 years, the sphincter muscles become sensitive and controllable, and bowel and bladder retention and elimination become a source of gratification. According to Freud, this stage is the origin of possessiveness (Mukherjee, 2000). During the phallic stage, the origin of identification, which is roughly from 3 to 6 years, the pleasure zone shifts to the genitals. At the onset of this stage, the boy realizes that he is similarly sexed as his father who is his rival in his attempts for having his mother’s love and affection. He then develops a kind of fear or anxiety, which Freud calls ‘castration anxiety’ (Sechrest et al., 1998). Freud believed that during this stage boys seek genital stimulation and develop both unconscious sexual desires for their mother and jealousy and hatred for their father, whom they consider a rival. Given these feelings, boys would also feel guilt and a lurking fear of punishment, perhaps by castration, from their father. Freud called this collection of feelings the Oedipus complex after the Greek legend of Oedipus, who unknowingly killed his father and married his mother (Weston, 1998).

With their sexual feelings repressed and redirected, children enter a latency stage, the period of acquisition of values. Freud maintained that during latency, extending from around age 6 to puberty, sexuality is dormant and children play mostly with peers of the same sex. The underlying contention here is that Freud did not have much to say about the implications of this stage apart from the fact that this is the stage where the children are likely to acquire values of their contemporary societies (Mukherjee, 2000).

At puberty, latency gives way to the final stage, the genital stage, the reliving of the phallic stage, as the person begins to experience sexual feelings toward others. Freud thought that this stage is actually reliving the phallic stage once again. This is transitional in nature, and has its implications for sound and normal growth of personality among the children (Mukherjee, 2000). The children at this stage tend to seek out their mates from opposite sexes, which is a perfectly normal behavior pattern. Myers (2001) is of the opinion that if children are not helped to be outgoing at this stage there is a possibility that they may regress to their early stage of Oedipus or Electra complex behavior manifestations, thus leading to later personality problems.

However, fellow researchers in the psychoanalytic school such as Alfred Adler and Karen Horney (Myers, 2001) agreed with Freud that childhood is important but they believed that childhood social, not sexual, tensions are crucial for personality formation. This is because much of our behavior is driven by efforts to conquer childhood feelings of inferiority, feelings that trigger our strivings for superiority and power. Also, childhood anxiety, caused by the dependent child’s sense of helplessness, triggers our desire for love and security.

Lastly, though the ideas of Freud have been incorporated into psychodynamic theory, most contemporary dynamic theorists and therapists are not wedded to the idea that sex is the basis of personality (Weston, 1996). He added that they do not talk about ids and egos, and do not go around classifying their patients as oral, anal, or phallic characters. What they do assume with Freud, is that much of our mental life is unconscious, that childhood shapes our personalities and ways of becoming attached to others, and that we often struggle with inner conflicts among our wishes, fears, and values.
The Trait Perspective

Personality of individuals is sometimes expressed in terms of certain traits or characteristics (Mukherjee, 2000). Psychoanalytic theory attempts to explain personality in terms of the dynamics that underlie behavior (Johnson et al., 1999). It peers beneath the surface searching for hidden motives. Rather than explaining hidden personality dynamics, trait researchers search for identifiable patterns of behavior or conscious motives that describe basic dimensions of personality. A trait or characteristic of an individual can be represented on a scale or dimension. Allport (1937) as cited in Myers (2001) prefers to use the term ‘personal disposition’ to that of trait or characteristics. How then do psychologists describe and classify personalities? Based on children’s physiological and psychological reactivity, Kagan (1989) classified children’s temperaments into either shy-inhibited or fearless-inhibited types. Sheldon (1954) as cited in Mukherjee (2000) classified people by body type.

Many trait theorists also view personality traits as biologically rooted. Kagan (1989) attributes differences in children’s shyness and inhibition to their autonomic nervous system reactivity. Genes have much to say about the temperament and the behavioral style that help define personality (Myers, 2001).

However, according to Myers (2001), classifying people as one or another distinct personality type fails to capture their full individuality. So how else could personalities be described? By placing people on several trait dimensions simultaneously, psychologists can describe countless individual personality variations. What trait dimensions describe personality?

Trait Dimension

Factor Analysis: One way has been to propose traits, such as anxiety, that some theory regards as basic. A new technique is factor analysis, the statistical procedure to identify clusters of test items that tap basic components of intelligence (such as spatial ability, reasoning ability, or verbal skill). Eysenck & Eysenck (1963) use two primary personality factors – extraversion-introversion and emotional stability-instability as axes for describing personality variation.

The Big Five Trait Dimension

Most researchers believe that while the Eysencks’ dimensions are important, they do not tell the whole story (Myers, 2001). A slightly expanded set of factors – dubbed the Big Five – does a better job (Goldberg, 1993; John, 1990; Wiggins, 1996). Around the world, people describe others in terms roughly consistent with the Big Five – how agreeable they are, how extraverted they are, and so forth (Myers, 2001). The Big factors are: Extroversion - this dimension captures one’s comfort level with relations. Extrovert personality tends to be gregarious, assertive and social. Introverts tend to be reserved timid, and quiet. Agreeableness - this dimension refers to an individual’s propensity to defer to others. Highly agreeable people are cooperative, warm, and trusting. People who score low on agreeableness are cold, disagreeable, and antagonistic. Conscientiousness - this dimension is a measure of reliability. A highly conscientious person is responsible, organized dependable, and persistent. Those who score low on this dimension are easily distracted, disorganized, and unreliable. Emotional Stability - this dimension taps a person’s ability to withstand stress. People with positive emotional stability tend to be calm, self-confident, and secure. Those with negative scores tend to be nervous, anxious, depressed, and insecure. Openness to experience - the final dimension addresses one’s range of interests and fascination with novelty. Extremely open people are creative, curious, and artistically sensitive. Those at the end of the openness category are conventional and find comfort in the familiar.

The contention here is that some researchers believe that Five is not the last word. They wonder whether dimensions such as self-consciousness, masculinity-femininity, or positive-negative emotion should be added. But for now the winning number in the personality lottery is five.
However, the worrisome issue underlying the evaluation of trait personality is that, are personality traits stable and enduring? Or does our behavior depend on where we are and whom we are with? In the views of Myers (2001), personality is ever-changing, tailored to the particular role or situation. This is because our behavior is influenced by the interaction of our inner disposition with our environment.

The Humanistic Perspective

Led by Abraham Maslow, Victor Franklyn, Virginia Satir, and Carl Rogers, humanistic psychologists have emphasized the growth potential of healthy people. With personalized methods, they study personality in hopes of fostering personal growth. Scientific researchers outside the humanistic tradition have picked up on one idea from humanistic theory – that our sense of self is at the center of our personality and outlook (Myers, 2001). Basically the humanists hold that humans possess an internal force, an inner directedness that pushes them to grow, to improve and to become the best individuals they are capable of becoming (Funder, 1995). This inner directedness is the primary force behind the development of personality. The personality psychologists belonging to the humanistic perspective had become discontented both with Freud’s negativity and with trait psychology’s objectivity. In contrast to Freud’s study of the base motives of “sick” people, humanistic psychologists focused on the ways “healthy” people strive for self-determination and self-realization (Borkenau & Liebler, 1993).

Humanists hold that reality is subjective i.e. everyone views life in different and highly personal terms. Key concepts here are the concept of self. This is an individual’s subjective perception of who he is and what he is like. An individual’s concept of self is learned from his interactions with others i.e. by measuring himself with others. Underlying the humanistic perspective is an assumption (shared by humanistic psychologists) that the self, as organizer of our thoughts, feelings, and actions, is a pivotal center of personality. From our self-focused perspective we too readily presume that others are noticing and evaluating us.

Humanistic psychologists assess personality through questionnaires on which people report their self-concept and in the therapy by seeking to understand others’ subjective personal experiences. However, the humanistic perspective is not without its criticism. Some psychologists believe that the concepts are vague and subjective. That it is not a scientific description of personality rather a description of personal values and ideals of the school of thought. Secondly, the individualism encouraged by humanistic psychology – trusting and acting on one’s feelings, being true to oneself, fulfilling oneself – can lead to self-indulgence, selfishness, and an erosion of moral restraints (Campbell & Specht, 1985, Wallach & Wallach, 1983). Indeed it is those who focus beyond themselves who are most likely to experience social support, to enjoy life, and to cope effectively with stress (Cranall, 1984). However, the humanistic psychologists in reaction to these objections believe that belligerence, hostility, and insensitivity are often traceable to a poor self-concept. Moreover, they argue, a secure, non-defensive self-acceptance is actually the first step toward loving others.

A final accusation leveled against humanistic psychology is that it fails to appreciate the reality of our human capacity for evil. Faced with assaults on the environment, overpopulation, and the spread of nuclear weapons, humans become apathetic from either of two rationalizations. One is a naive optimism that denies the threat (“People are basically good; everything will work out”). The other is a dark despair (“It’s hopeless; why try?”). Action requires enough realism to fuel concern and enough optimism to provide hope. Humanistic psychology, opined that the critics, encourage the needed hope but not the equally necessary realism about evil (Myers, 2001). In their views, they believe that evil springs not from human nature but from toxic cultural influences, including the constricting, destructive influence of our educational system, the injustice of our distribution of
wealth, and cultivated prejudices against individuals who are different (Gendlin, 2010). May (1982) dissented with this view that humans make up the culture. The culture is evil as well as good because human beings who constitute it, are evil as well as good.

The Social-Cognitive Perspective

The social-cognitive perspective on personality applies principles of learning, thinking, and social influence and how they work together to influence behavior in particular situations (Lachman & Weaver, 1998; Lefcourt, 1982; Presson & Benassi, 1996). Led by Alfred, Gabriele Oettingen, Martin Seligman and others, the cognitive social learning perspective emphasizes the importance of external events and how we interpret them. Social-cognitive theorists believe that behaviors can be learnt through conditioning or by observing others and modeling our behavior after theirs (Miller et al, 1986). They also emphasize the importance of mental processes: What we think about our situations affects our behavior. Instead of focusing solely on how our environment controls us (behaviorism), social-cognitive theorists focus on how we and our environment interact. The main concern is how to interpret and respond to external events, how schemas, our memories, and expectations influence our behavior patterns (Rotter, 2000).

Bandura (1986) refers the process of interacting with our environment reciprocal determinism. He added that behavior, internal personal factors, and environmental influences all operate as interlocking determinants of each other. Social cognitive researchers explore the effect of differing situations on people’s behavior patterns and attitudes. They examine for example, how viewing aggressive or nonaggressive models affects behavior. They access the impact of dehumanizing situations on people’s attitudes. And they analyze the consistency of people’s personalities in varying circumstances.

In essence, psychologists that belong to this school of thought believe that the best means of predicting future behavior is neither a personality test nor an interviewer’s intuition. Rather, it is the person’s past behavior patterns in similar situations (Mischel, 1981; Oullette & Wood, 1998; Schmidt & Hunter, 1998). For example, as long as the situation and the person remain much the same, the best predictor of future job performance is past job performance.

However, in evaluating the social-cognitive perspective, the social-cognitive perspective on personality sensitizes researchers to how situations affect, and are affected by, individuals. More than do the other perspectives, it builds from psychological research on learning and cognition. One criticism is that the theory focuses so much on the situation that it fails to appreciate the person’s inner traits. Carlson (1984) opined that situation does guide our behavior but in many instances our unconscious motives, emotions, and pervasive traits shine through.

Implications of the Study

Each perspective teaches us something. The psychoanalytic theory arises out of developmental considerations of individuals. It draws our attention to the unconscious and irrational aspects of human existence. The psychoanalytic theory, though attempts to explain the terminal behavior patterns of individuals from causal considerations, tell hardly anything, and individuals can make no use of this body of knowledge in the organization. There is, however, one advantage from the learning of these theories of developmental schools of Freud and post Freudians. They tell about various abnormal behavior patterns common in many individuals, the understanding of which seems to be necessary for managers in organizations. The trait perspective systematically describes and classifies important components of personality. It considers personality of an individual as consisting of few traits or dimensions of behavior pattern. This theory is useful since a massive amount of research has gone into their implications for education and organizations (Mukherjee, 2000). Managers can draw benefit from the readings of these dimensional theories on personality, and hence
their relevance in social psychology. The humanistic perspective reminds us of the importance of our sense of self and of our potential for self-actualization. The social-cognitive perspective teaches us that we always act in the context of situations that we help to create. Human personality reveals its different aspects when we view it from different perspectives, and each perspective can enlarge our vision of the whole person.

Summary and Conclusion

The psychoanalytic perspective to personality which was proposed by Sigmund Freud saw personality as composed of pleasure-seeking psychic impulses, a reality-oriented executive, and an internalized set of ideals. Psychoanalytic theory aims to reveal the unconscious. However, many researchers accepted many of Freud’s ideas but they also argued that we have motives other than sex and aggression, and that the ego’s conscious control is greater than what Freud supposed.

Trait researchers describe the predispositions that underlie our actions. Through factor analysis, researchers have isolated five important dimensions of personality. Genetic predispositions influence most of such traits. Critics of the trait perspective question the consistency with which traits are expressed. Although people’s traits persist over time and fairly consistent, human behavior varies widely from situation to situation.

Humanistic psychologists turned psychology’s attention from baser motives and environmental conditioning to the growth potential of healthy people, as seen through the individual’s own experiences. Humanistic psychology helped to renew psychology’s interest in the self. Nevertheless, humanistic psychology’s critics complain that its concepts are vague and subjective, it values individualist and self-centered, and its assumptions naively optimistic. The social-cognitive perspective applies principles of learning, cognition, and social behavior to personality, with particular emphasis on the way in which our personality influences and is influenced by our interaction with the environment. They have found that the best way to predict someone’s behavior in a given situation is to observe that person’s behavior pattern in similar situations. The theory is faulted for slighting the importance of unconscious dynamics, emotions, and inner traits.

In conclusion, seldom in life does a single perspective on any issue give us a complete picture of another human being. Acknowledging the fact that there are some shortcomings associated with each of the perspectives on personality, it is evident that individuals differ in the way they perceive, relate, feel, act, react, and make decisions, among others. Strategic and human resources managers should have this in mind in managing people in their organizations. To this end, the recruitment policies of the organizations should ensure the use of adequate scales to determine the traits that are compatible with those required to facilitate the achievement of the goals of the organization.

References


Personality Theories: A Comparative Analysis


Omoregbe Omorodion and Festus Osayande


58