# Critically assess the strengths and weaknesses of personal construct theory's contribution to our understanding of individual differences in personality.

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The topic of 'individual differences' in personality has fascinated psychologists since the inception of the subject and indeed within philosophy for thousands of years. Throughout history, personality was conceived of in terms of 'types', perhaps the earliest being those of Hippocrates in Ancient Greece, who divided people into categories: choleric, melancholic, phlegmatic and sanguine; based upon a scientifically naïve notion of an excess or lack of 'bodily humours'. Butt (2007) explains how contemporary theories regarding individual differences in personality grew from three dominant psychological traditions: Experimental, Psychometric and Clinical. All of these strands of thought are interested in the individual differences that people express, in terms of behaviour and what is commonly perceived as 'personality'. The experimental tradition, often argued to be the dominant one within 20$^{th}$ century psychology began with behaviourist theories, before being surpassed by cognitive theories in the latter half of the century. The psychometric tradition originated in attempts to measure cognitive abilities such as intelligence, establishing 'traits', ways in which individuals could be said to differ from one another. This essay however, concentrates on the challenge to these theories made by Personal Construct Theory (PCT), which developed from within the clinical tradition and the work of George Kelly (1955, cited in Salmon, 2003). PCT will be contrasted with the work of Eysenck and Rachman (1965) who exemplify the psychometric tradition of 'trait theories', in order to tease out the strengths and weaknesses of adopting a PCT position, in terms of both its underlying theory and methodological applications.

According to Butt (2007), PCT adopts a philosophical position akin to phenomenology and is rooted within clinical experience and practice (Kelly, 1955, cited in Salmon, 2003). PCT suggests an ontological description of people as fluid entities and thus, not static and measurable objects. People are viewed as active agents that construe events that happen to them, rather than being simply shaped by them. Kelly (1955, cited in Salmon, 2003) described people as 'like scientists', each with their own theory about the world and about themselves. Indeed, an individual's sense of 'self' was conceived as a working theory.

PCT focuses upon the individual's theory about his/her self and how they perceive others, revealing their personal system of constructions. Each person uniquely creates reality for

themselves, building shifting landscapes of meaning in the process. PCT suggests that individuals create systems of understandings and constructions about the world, based upon their own idiosyncratic personal experiences, yet these constructions are also seen as socially situated in culture and history (Butt, 2007). PCT is primarily concerned with appreciating the diversity of 'world views' that individuals have, emphasising 'lived experience' and personal and intentional meanings as the root of action and human agency. It attempts to address and describe the complexity and depth of human experience, rather than attempting to scientifically explain its existence.

Salmon (2003) also shows that PCT has practical application, in his work regarding teaching and learning. The PCT adopted by Salmon (2003) recognises the relativistic nature of human knowledge, the multiple realities and positionalities that this creates and the subsequent provisional nature of knowledge and attitudes. She constructs an ontology of people as 'lifelong learners', with learning being akin to living, yet with each individual differing enormously in what they come to know. She suggests that unpredictable events and dilemmas force people to rethink, sometimes even deeply held beliefs. Salmon (2003) argued that this reflects the difficulty of teaching practice as experienced by teachers and learners. Her theory suggests that learning and education result from interactions that to an ethnomethodologist, would involve some kind of minor 'breach of the natural attitude' (Garfinkel, 1967).

For Salmon (2003), the meaning of learning is not politically neutral: pupils hear teachers from personal contexts, positionality and their own personally constructed conceptions, that may conflict or confirm the discourse of the teacher. Or, they may construe the ideologies of the teacher as not utilisable within their system of personal constructs. Salmon (2003) suggests that people cannot be expected to revise their construing at will, as they have invested in their own constructions. Thus, learning in any context requires change and is often problematic, incorporating new experiences into existing systems of perceiving the world. The adoption of language codes utilised in the curriculum may involve a threat to a valued source of personal identity, as was ably shown in the research of Willis (1976) in the reproduction of working class attitudes towards education. Knowledge is therefore not politically neutral, yet contains the interests of socio-cultural groupings which may not coincide with those of the learner.

Salmon (2003) suggests that PCT transcends the individual-society dualism within psychology, by describing how social inequalities can be reproduced through the hidden curriculum, confirming particular socio-cultural identities as 'superior' and being expressed idiosyncratically on an individual level. Accordingly, learning is an active process, rather than passive acceptance. Similarly, living is seen as an 'active' process, where personality is not fixed, yet open to change and personal development, thus transcending the agency-structure dualism. Knowledge, much like people, is also constructed as dynamic, temporary and open to change.

Early methodological techniques used in PCT were often based on Kelly's (1955, cited in Salmon, 2003) repertory grid technique (RGT), which attempts to make personal meanings

explicit and accessible to reflection and therefore helps the individual concerned articulate their reasoning for actions. This method allows the researcher to explore an individual's personal constructions of the world. Salmon's (2003) own 'the Salmon Line', represents personal 'progression' in the form of a line and asks the individual to define personal and idiosyncratic meanings attached to progression. This can include: curriculum sphere, meaning of progress, evidence that would count as progress and identification of blocks to progression.

In contrast to PCT is 'trait theory' originating in the psychometric tradition within psychology. A tradition highly influenced by positivist philosophy and strict adherence to scientific methods in order to produce valid knowledge and explain the existence of phenomena. A 'trait' refers to an enduring way in which one person differs from another. 'Trait theories' are exemplified in the work of Eysenck and Rachman's (1965) study, where classification is seen as fundamental to the 'scientific study of human personality'. Eysenck and Rachman (1965) suggest that through the use of factor analysis, clustering groups of traits and then reducing these to super-ordinate measurements, individuals could be measured using standardised scales along two personality dimensions that could be shown to endure over time: extraversion-introversion and neuroticism-stability. Differences along these continuums were then said to be linked to biological differences of cortical and autonomic arousal respectively. Eysenck and Rachman (1965) then contended that personality inventories could be used to make predictions about how people were likely to act in certain situations and make comparisons between individuals. This methodology reflects Eysenck and Rachman's (1965) appeal to scientific credibility and an adherence to the use of quantitative data collection and analysis. This is in complete contrast to the largely qualitative techniques employed in the 'repertory grid' and particularly the 'Salmon Line' (Salmon, 2003). These methodological differences between PCT and trait theory, are indications of their deeply entrenched philosophical differences on a theoretical level.

Butt (2007) suggests that trait theory's strength, is its relates to how people attribute personality to one another in everyday life and appeals to an intuitive sense that different people respond differently, in the same situation and that people show consistency in responses across a variety of contexts. Trait theorists are thus said to resemble the 'lay theories' available to 'folk psychologists'. This is thought to strengthen trait theories claims and utility. By measuring dimensional characteristics, allows for comparisons between people along dimensions and continuums, yet does trait theory do so unfairly? What in fact are trait theories measuring? Butt (2007) taking a social constructivist stance, argues that social psychological knowledge, rather than being based on pre-existing phenomena waiting to be discovered, suggests that knowledge is constructed and situated historically and culturally. Knowledge therefore, is seen as being socially situated and not a measurable and objective standard separated from those who produce it.

Trait theory rests upon the assumption that a consistent structure of personality resides in each individual person, yet perceptions of attributes related to others may have more to do with those doing the perceiving, than those being perceived. Traits from this view are nothing more than constructions in the 'eye of the beholder' that reflect a world view of the

perceiver, rooted within cultural ideologies and not a reflection of inner psychological dispositions of those being rated. Mischel (1968, cited in Butt, 2007) argues that attributions of disposition made about others reflect the perceptual prejudices of the onlooker. He found that people will rate others' attributes having observed them very briefly and that behavioural traits rarely show the consistency that trait theorists suggest. These findings suggest a 'fundamental attribution error' is being made by trait theories, with those doing the rating attributing dispositions to the actions and behaviours of others without any justification. Mischel (1968, cited in Butt, 2007) also criticised the questionnaires used in psychometric testing, with words such as 'often' being construed to mean different things to different people and are thus an invalid indicator of some 'underlying trait', accordingly, behaviour is theorised as much more context specific and situated.

Trait theory does attempt to capture the unique richness of individual character, rather measure and classify. Contrastingly, PCT attempts to capture the depth and richness of individual experience and how people construe the world through personal systems of meaning. The emphasis of PCT is on understanding meanings from the point of view of the research participant, rather than supplying a scientific explanation for their actions.

Butt (2004) states that there are over eighteen thousand trait related words in the English Language, which are reduced down by factor analysis to clusters and groups of terms that are often described together, which are then meant to be economic and meaningful; yet, the more economical the categories utilised by a theory, the less it will capture individuality. Similarly, the more idiosyncratic a theoretical description becomes, the less capable a researcher will be at making comparisons between people (Butt, 2004).

The philosophical differences between PCT and trait theory are not easily overcome. Richards (2002) suggests that traits may be no more than an artefact of the measurement system used to analyse them. Richards (2002) also criticises the circularity of trait theories and questions whether 'attitudes' even exist as 'natural' phenomena. It can be argued that the nomothetic approach adopted by trait theory offer little more than a description of behaviour and displays a circularity of reasoning, for example: explaining aggressive behaviour by saying someone is aggressive. In response to this criticism, Eysenck and Rachman (1965) suggest that personality traits can be related to underlying physiological factors: cortical arousal in extraversion and autonomic arousal in levels of neuroticism. In so doing, they attempt to avoid the criticism that trait theory just re-describes phenomena, by positing a materialist account of behaviour and the mind-body problem within philosophy, an account for human action based in unchangeable and stable biological difference.

A major criticism of trait theory is that it can be said to have created its own industry. Personality questionnaires are commonly used to classify suitability for job applications, implying that individuals have a fixed and unchangeable personality rooted in biology. PCT suggests that this endeavour could be reproducing social inequalities within the job application process, with the power to judge normality and pathology in those who have access to the tools of measurement.

The debate over what constitutes a personality and how to theorise it, highlights the contested nature of knowledge between nomothetic and positivistic notions of measuring empirical 'reality', and constructivist notions of a fluid and negotiated one. This is exemplified in the differences in both methodological and theoretical style and content of PCT compared to trait theory. Trait theory makes no attempt to explain individual uniqueness in any depth, yet maps individuals along continuums in order for comparisons can be made. This is utilised within occupational settings to quantify and classify differences between people and make predictions of performance. Trait theories attempt to root these applications in individual differences at a biological level as an explanatory science. In contrast, PCT originates in the clinical tradition and defines personality in terms of the idiosyncratic frame of reference that each individual employs to construe reality and makes no attempt to classify or compare individuals with each other. In this theory, interpretations of reality lead to action and agency, with an emphasis on understanding. Perhaps PCT's major weakness is that not all action is intentional and we do much of our construing and constructing after events happen; it does not explain why people behave the way they do in the first place. It is equally debatable however, whether trait theories succeed either in this regard, or whether they just reify culturally dominant notions of personality structure. A major strength of PCT is its accounting for the transaction between individual personal constructions with those socially available, situated within historical contexts and power relationships, thus transcending many traditional dualisms within psychological theorising.

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