

### **Individual Differences and Personality Theories.**

The human personality is a wide sphere of knowledge that cannot be categorically tied down to a specific definition. It refers to an attempt to capture and summarise the human essence. Seen from the two parts of the word – person- ality – it could be described as the science of describing persons; the differences, uniqueness and similarities that make up individuals of the human race (Burger, 1997, p.6). According to Carver and Scheier (2000), *“Personality is a dynamic organisation, inside the person, of psychophysical systems that create a person’s characteristic patterns of behaviour, thoughts, and feelings.”* (Carver and Scheier 2000, p.5).

Obviously, as conveyed in this definition, no two persons are exactly identical, not even identical twins. Some people are anxious, some are risk-taking; some are phlegmatic, some highly-strung; some are confident, some shy; and some are quiet and some are loquacious. Understanding these differences between people and the underlying factors responsible for human actions has been one of the core areas of psychology. Numerous theories have been propounded, over the years, from the first cohesive theory of Sigmund Freud, all in a bid to explain personality and the reason for human differences. The purpose of this essay is to take a critical look at two of these theories - Sigmund Freud’s Psychodynamic Theory and Carl Rogers Phenomenological Theory - contrasting their strengths and weakness, to demonstrate how each fare in the light of the other, and how they separately explain individual differences in the human race

#### **Psychodynamic Theory**

Psychodynamic theories started with the works of Sigmund Freud (1856-1936), who was born in the Czech Republic but later moved to Germany, with his family, when he was young, and then later to Vienna, where he spent the most part of his life. Freud, a trained neurologist,

wanted to find explanations for the severally varied and numerous psychological conditions prevalent in his time which seem to lack physical cause, and was influenced by the work of the scientist von Helmholtz and secondly, by steam power, which was the predominant technology of his time (Freud's Psycho Dynamic Theory, 2006).

Von Helmholtz under whom Freud studied was involved with physics, physiology and psychology, this coupled with the fact that steam power occupied almost every part of the daily life then, shaped the beginning of Freud's theorising. He became interested in the laws of thermodynamics, essentially, the thermodynamics of steam power and thus sought similarities between thermodynamics and the human personality. Freud therefore utilized an analogy of thermodynamics to explain his theories of psychodynamics.

The first law of thermodynamics; energy can neither be created nor destroyed, but can be converted from one form to the other, was the predominant law guiding Freud psychodynamic theory. To demonstrate this to be true with human personality, Freud adopted Darwin's assumption that emotion is a form of physical energy (Ritvo, 1990) and thus argue that psychic energy can neither be created nor destroyed, but only transformed from one form to the other. This served as the basis for his assumption that the bulk of an individual's personality is shaped from childhood experiences (Myers, 1986).

According to Freud, the human personality can be categorised into three distinctive parts; the id, ego and superego, he used thermodynamic as an extended metaphor to explain this division. The id was described as our biological needs and drives, such as hunger, thirst and sex. According to Freud's analogy, the id provided energy for the system just as fire provides energy in thermodynamics. Freud described the super ego as the societal rules, our voice of conscience and compares it to the lid on the apparatus that contain the water to be converted to steam. The

ego, on the other hand, is the conscious mind that contains an individual's thoughts, judgements, feelings and memories (Myers, 1986; Ziegler 2002).

Thus in Freud's view, the ego plays the role of mediator between the id, the superego and the external world, to balance our primitive drive, our morals, ideals, and taboos, and the limitations of reality. In his early writings, Freud associated ego with an individual's sense of 'self', but subsequently, he portrayed it more as a set of psychic functions including reality testing, defence, synthesis of information, intellectual functioning, memory etc., whereas, superego stands in opposition to the desires of the id, norms and values that as a child, an individual absorbs from both parents and the environment, at a tender age. It is thus our conscience and do includes the sense of right and wrong and maintaining specific taboos that arise due to a child's internalisation of parental culture (Ziegler 2002; Gray 2002). The id represents the primal process of thinking, an individual's most primitive needs and gratifications impulses. It is thus organised around primitive instinctive drives of sexuality and aggression.

Freud proposes that from a child's birth until adulthood, he or she passes through psychosexual stages of development. During these different psychosexual stages of growth, Freud believed that the id's pleasure seeking energy occupies different pleasure sensitive areas of the body. During the first stage, which lasts from birth to about eighteen month of life, it centres on the mouth and this stage is called the oral stage. From eighteen months to three years of life is the anal stage and during this period, the stimulation of the bladder and bowel brings about gratification. From the third year to the sixth year of life known as the phallic stage, the pleasure seeking areas move to the genitals. The other stage is the latency period, which last until just about puberty. During this stage, the child's sexuality is said to be 'torpid'. At puberty, the child

enters the genital stage and begins to feel sexual attraction and feelings towards others (Myers, 1986).

Freud's psychodynamic theories assume that an adult's personality develops from how he deals with the conflict that arises during any one of the psychosexual stages. He argued that negative energy or anxiety from our childhood conflicts could not be destroyed. People who successfully resolve such conflicts do not have psychological problems later in adult life, but in those who do not, the anxiety is pushed down and out of consciousness. This defence mechanism was termed 'repression' (Myers, 1986).

Freud hypothesises that only the ego was in direct contact with the external world, with the most of the human personality believed to be buried below the surface, in the unconscious. Thus, he asserts that ego deals with reality anxiety, while id deals with neurotic anxiety and superego with moral anxiety. Freud also believes that anxieties of the id and the superego were a result of a conflict during a childhood psychosexual stage of development (Freud's Psycho Dynamic Theory, 2006).

Furthermore, Freud analyse that the ego, which is the part of the personality that is obvious, is able to show signs of anxiety, either acknowledge or repressed. However, the anxieties of the id and superego are often repressed into the unconscious as protective mechanism (Freud's Psycho Dynamic Theory, 2006). Thus, Freud's psychodynamic model analysed three processes of personality and levels of consciousness (Schultz and Schultz 1994). The levels of consciousness, as proposed by Freud includes the Perceptual conscious, which consist of the very minimal mental events presently occupying one's mind, the Pre-conscious, which consist of information and impulses, though not in the centre of one's attention, can be retrieved with much ease. The third level of consciousness is the unconscious, which holds a

large mass of information, events and impulses. The unconscious part of the mind holds forgotten and repressed memories. These repressed memories are not subject to rational control; they therefore, live on, and constitute the most dominant forces in an individual's personality (Funder 1997, p.15) [See Fig 1 in Appendix].

To sum it all up, Sigmund Freud's psychodynamic theories of the unconscious assumes a private and personal mind; a mind that is populated with wishes, desires and needs that have a biological intra-psychological origin and which follow endemic mechanical laws (Ratner, 1994).

### **Phenomenological Theory**

The Phenomenological school of thought can be traced back to the work of Wilhelm Wundt who is often considered as having conducted the first formal psychological research in the 1870's (Schultz and Schultz 1994). The concepts of the perspective includes phenomenology, existentialism, and humanistic. The perspective on personality sees humankind as being intrinsically good and self-perfecting. Individuals are seen as being continually drawn towards growth, health, self-sufficiency and maturity; it thus focuses on people potentials and places a great deal of personality explanations on the attainment of these potential or otherwise (Funder, 1997)

The Phenomenological perspective is a wide array of theories that does not seem to be strictly connected, however, they are all categorised as Phenomenological because they all value and focus on the nature of individual's subjective experience. The Humanistic Theory of Carl Rogers is one of the core theories of this school of thought. It evolved out of his work as a clinical psychologist and developed as an offshoot of his theory of client-centred (later called

person-centred) therapy. He was primarily a therapist, with an abiding respect for the dignity of persons and an interest in persons as subjects rather than objects.

The concept of existentialism; the idea that we are responsible for our own lives, was greatly exemplified in Carl Rogers's humanistic theory (Ziegler 2002)

The core of Rogers's theory was what he called the 'Actualisation Tendency' and the 'Self'. He believed that everybody have a tendency towards growth and increase; towards a fuller life – what he called 'actualisation. He defined this as the need to maintain and enhance life and that the major goal of life is to satisfy this need. According to this theory, the desire for actualisation can be on two levels: On the physical level: which entails staying alive by eating, keeping warm, avoiding physical danger etc. And on a higher psychological level; where self actualisation involve testing and fulfilling ones capabilities, seeking out new experiences, mastering new skills, searching for more exciting jobs and vocations in place of boring ones etc.(Engler,1995)

Rogers believe that in the process of pursuing self actualisation, individuals undergo what he referred to as the 'organismic valuing process'. This means that during the course of several experiences, those that are seen as beneficial and 'enhancing' are valued as good and therefore sought after, however, experiences that are seen as not 'enhancing' are valued as bad and avoided. Thus, the human being knows exactly what is good for him/her and what is not. In this regards, Rogers considered someone that is self actualising as a Fully Functioning Person. According to him, these people are open to experiencing their feelings and don't feel threatened by those feelings no matter what they are. They trust their own feelings. They are open to the experiences of the world. They live lives full of meaning, challenge and fulfilment (Schultz and Schultz 1994; Carver and Scheier 2000; Boeree, 1998).

Moreover, in consonance with the psychodynamic theory, Rogers believed that, to a large extent, childhood experiences determine whether a person will become self actualised or not. He argues that it is paramount that people, during their childhood, receive positive regard, i.e. affection and approval, from the important people in their lives, especially their parents (Engler, 1995). This positive regard could be unconditional, i.e. without strings attached or conditional (with strings attached). Although it is very important that people, as children, receive unconditional positive regard from their important ones, Rogers explain that this regard is often conditional. To be loved and approved the child must be well-mannered, quiet, assertive, boyish, girlish, whatever. These things are incorporated as conditions of worth. If the conditions are few and reasonable then the child will be fine but if the conditions of worth are severely limiting then self-actualization will be severely impeded. Rogers believe that these external conditions of worth come to control more and more of a person's behaviour. With time, individuals begin to apply these conditions to the 'self' resulting in a pattern of self-acceptance or self-rejection referred to as 'conditional self-regard, by Rogers (Carver and Scheier 2000; Pervin and Oliver 1997). In the long run, a gap opens between a person's actions and the real self. The individual tries to conceal the gap with perceptual distortions, denying the difference between the self and reality.

The second part of Rogers's theory is the concept of self and congruence. However, unlike Freud, he argued that 'self' does not exist at birth, that infants gradually differentiate between self and non-self and that self is constantly evolving, thus dynamic (Ziegler 2002). Rogers also differentiated between the ideal self and the actual self. The ideal self is what the individual would want to be, while, the actual self is what an individual is or believes he/she is. In a self-actualised person, there is congruence i.e. harmony/agreement, between these two self

or congruence between the actual self and experience i.e. the individual's experience fits into what he considers himself/herself to be. Incongruence between the perceptions of self could lead to anxiety, irrespective of whether the incongruence is between actual and real self or between actual self and experience. Rogers therefore sees the common human condition as one of this incongruence between the perceptions of self and experience.

### **Comparison**

Weighing both theories against each other, it becomes interesting to note that Freud and Rogers' theory of personality are based on some very basic assumptions and yet occupy opposite ends of the spectrum of views on human motivation. Their concept of human nature and the role of rationality in human motivation are diametrically opposed. While Freud's Psychodynamic theory seem to be so pessimistic, arguing that individuals have unconscious drives that would, if permitted, manifest itself in incest, murder and other activities which are considered crimes in contemporary society, Rogers humanistic theory of phenomenology takes on a very optimistic view of individual personality and argues that the core of our nature is essentially positive and aligned towards self actualisation. Though Rogers agrees that we may behave aggressive and violent at times, but at such times, we are neurotic and are not functioning as fully developed human beings (Pervin & Oliver 1997).

However, Freud's theory appears to be a complete theory of personality and explains behaviour, although one should bear in mind that this theory did not come as a personality theory per se. It was the first cohesive theory of psychology, thus it is complete and cohesive compared to Rogers' theory. Also it emphasizes the defence mechanisms of ego and stimulated further theoretical/research work in personality and resulted in awakened interest in psychological treatment of mental disorders. On the negative side, the theory has been greatly criticised for lack



of scientific proof, its over-emphasis on sexual drive as a determinant of human behaviour and its apparent ignorance of the role the environment and society plays in personality and behaviours (Schultz and Schultz 1994)

On the other hand, the major strength of Rogers' theory is optimism, the believe that human beings have enormous potential, possibility, and choice, and the uniqueness of the individual. This is obvious from the meaning of Phenomenology "the subjective experience of individuals". Placing great emphasis on appreciating reality and maintaining a close contact with ones inner feelings (Carver and Scheier 2000).

However, the theory ignores other determinant of individual behaviours (e.g. genetic, learning, dispositions, unconscious, etc.) and like Freud's Psychodynamic theory, lacks scientific evidence. Infact, it prides itself on being unscientific, arguing that the mind is clearly different from molecules other scientific matters, since it can affect the result of any study on it.

Finally, both theories made categorical efforts towards understanding and explaining why we do what we do; the motives for our actions, thinking and morals. Individually, they have greatly added to the wealth of knowledge on the way the human mind works, while collectively, they have make up a powerful tool in explaining individual differences. However, when both theories are weighed in the light of contemporary research in cognitive psychology, Rogers' personality explanations seems to be preferable over the Freudian model.

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**Appendix**

**Fig 1**

