PART III

DOMAINS OF EVERYDAY UNDERSTANDING

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Everyday Assumptions, Language and Personality

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The social-constructionist orientation consists of a policy statement. It suggests a very specific way of looking at social reality (cf. Gergen, 1985). The important point about this is that a social-constructionist orientation in general does not specify a systematic theoretical framework with a corresponding methodology (cf. Coulter, 1983). These aspects have to be worked out in detail independently. The influence of social constructionism on psychology is in that sense very much in its early stages. That is, there are some new developments and theoretical frameworks that are emerging, but their history is by no means an established or closed order.

Nevertheless, one of the intriguing questions raised by a social-constructionist approach is about the relationship between everyday and scientific conceptions of the person. In our everyday dealings we talk about persons, we describe their actions and characteristics, we use a number of assumptions and theories about different types of persons and their make-ups. These assumptions and theories are part and parcel of our cultural knowledge. Not only do they help us interpret others, but such theories also provide rationales to explain our own actions. Similarly, in scientific discourse about persons, as for instance in personality theory, the aim is to furnish explanations or understandings of people, of their make-up and of the differences between people and the reasons for their actions.

The chief difference between everyday theories and scientific theories is in the representation of knowledge. Both obviously use language as a medium. In the case of personality theorists there is a specialized language that is developed specifically for the purpose of scientific representation. The assumption is that this language is not necessarily available to all members of a language community in part because it is taken for granted that scientific knowledge
supersedes everyday knowledge and is thus encoded in a different language. In contrast, everyday theories are contained in a language that is shared by both the personality theorist and people in everyday life. Indeed, in deriving scientific theories about personality the personality theorist relies on everyday language because this provides the medium by which instructions are issued, responses are provided, descriptions are obtained. Therefore, the construction of scientific theories inevitably relies on information gained through everyday communication and language. What happens with this information in the construction of a scientific model? This general question can be unfolded into the following more specific questions.

What is the relationship between the types of theories that are advanced in scientific work about persons and theories that are found in everyday life? In which ways do scientific models of the person rely on everyday conceptions of persons? Is there explicit acknowledgement of everyday theories in scientific models and how, if at all, is the link between scientific and everyday theories of the person acknowledged? Do scientific models of personality supersede everyday models of personality? These are the types of questions that this chapter attempts to cover.

In examining these questions I shall focus on two specific issues. The first will consist in an examination of a problem that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s bringing about a convergence between person perception in social psychology and taxonomic work on personality. The aim of this work was to examine trait terms that are available in language with a view to developing a taxonomy that would be representative of personality. Indeed, there appears to be a relatively stable taxonomy of trait terms, but the controversy in the 1960s was about whether this was a representation of personality, a manifestation of perceptual phenomena displayed by the implicit theories held by people in everyday life or a representation of the linguistic features of trait terms, namely a phenomenon particular to language rather than personality. We shall explore these issues in a brief overview and then give a social-constructionist interpretation to taxonomic models of personality.

The second question that I shall present is a review of research which is more recent in its origin and which has been explicitly conducted from a social-constructionist standpoint. This research focuses on comparisons of scientific statements about, for instance, what characteristics an extravert or an introvert manifests and the characteristics that are ascribed to them in everyday life. The aim of such comparisons is to unfold similarities and differences between scientific and everyday conceptions of persons and personality.
Traits, Biases and Personality

The construction of a personality taxonomy has been one of the focal concerns for personality theories and has a venerable history. One possible way of coming to terms with this problem has been to analyse how personality characteristics have been coded in language. A prominent approach to this question has been the investigation of trait and other personality descriptive terms. There are literally thousands of trait terms to be found in language and a nearly infinite number of ways to describe persons. A number of psychologists have therefore aligned themselves with a view expressed by Cattell:

The position we shall adopt is a very direct one . . . making only the one assumption that all aspects of human personality which are or have been of importance, interest, or utility have already been recorded in the substance of language. For, throughout history, the most fascinating subject of general discourse, and also that in which it has been most vitally necessary to have adequate, representative symbols, has been human behaviour. Necessity could not possibly have been barren where so little apparatus is required to permit the birth of invention. (1943: 483)

This statement by Cattell, which has also been termed the ‘sedimentation’ or ‘lexical’ hypothesis (see Goldberg, 1981), has served as a guiding framework for a substantive area of research in the exploration of the interrelations between trait terms. As Goldberg (1989) points out, it was Galton (1884) who may have been one of the first to point out that the socially significant aspects of individual differences will become coded in language. The modern approaches towards exploring trait terms have aimed at summarizing trait interrelations structurally. The main methodological approach, which is essentially factor-analytic, attempts to represent traits in terms of those dimensions which best summarize the interrelations between these terms. This consists of finding properties common to a variety of trait terms that allow a simpler representation of the enormous variety that one can find in a dictionary. For instance, the earliest investigators in this area, Allport and Odbert (1936), extracted about 18,000 personality descriptive terms from the second edition of Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language.

Particularly during the 1960s, there was a considerable debate about what the types of taxonomies obtained by factor-analytic studies meant. One view, maintained by those in personality, was that these taxonomies were representative of the characteristics of actual people. Another view that was voiced by people working in the implicit personality theory framework in social psychology was that the interrelations discovered by personality theorists were
actually reflections of perceivers’ implicit theories, that is their cognitive representations of personality. Finally, there was a third view (Mulaik, 1964) which maintained that the interrelations between trait terms were due to linguistic conventions about the meanings of terms. For instance, kind and good are analogue terms and are therefore semantically overlapping. They will therefore be used similarly and contrastively to terms that are contraries or antonyms, such as brusque or bad. In this view it is the positive and negative semantic relations between terms or language conventions which are essentially regarded as giving rise to the relationship between trait terms. Related to this view are also arguments that judgements about persons on person-descriptive terms are subject to a bias mediated by semantic factors (for example, D’Andrade, 1965; Shweder, 1982).

In the following section on trait taxonomies and everyday conceptions of personality we shall review this literature and then assess it from a social-constructionist perspective, by examining the fundamental role played by ordinary language in the constitution of the relationships between trait terms.

**Trait Taxonomies, Biases and Language: Perspectives on Structure**

The central question posed by trait taxonomists is how to simplify the vast number of trait terms that are available by examining trait interrelations. This type of examination can proceed by adopting a number of different empirical strategies. One of them is to find out how they are attributed to other people, that is judgements about the applicability of traits to actual persons. Another procedure is the examination of judgements about the interrelations among the trait terms themselves. In a recent paper, Peabody and Goldberg (1989) distinguish between these two types of judgemental approaches as external and internal judgements respectively.

The early empirical background to this area can be broadly divided into two separate views on what the relations between trait terms meant. One of these is to regard these systematic relationships between traits as an error source or a bias. The other is to regard these systematic relationships as an indicator of the structure of personality. A systematic response tendency was noted early on in a number of studies employing an ‘external judgement’ approach (for example, Newcomb, 1931; Rugg, 1922; Thorndike, 1920; Wells, 1907). What would appear to be one of the earliest reports of the systematic relationships observed in the use of trait terms is a study by Wells (1907). He found that if a person was seen as very friendly
then a host of related adjectives such as sociable, kind, helpful would also be seen as characteristic of this person. These results drew attention to systematic tendencies in the response patterns of raters or observers. Thus the familiar ‘halo effect’, a term coined by Thorndike (for example, 1920), referred to the influence that the general impression a subject had formed of a target had on his/her ratings of the target. The finding was that the halo effect would result in spuriously high correlations between, for example, adjectives sharing similar meanings. The argument was that if ‘experience’ were the actual guide to judgements or impressions, then such high correlations should not occur. Thus the halo effect referred to a constant error in psychological rating which came about through ‘suffusing ratings of special features with a halo belonging to the individual as a whole’ (Thorndike, 1920: 25). This effect, termed the ‘packaging of information’ by Bruner and Tagiuri (1954: 641), was also noted by others (cf. Symonds, 1925, 1935). A related tendency was commented on by Newcomb (1931) and termed by Guilford (1936) a ‘logical error’. Newcomb found that when judges recorded behaviours of others as they took place then the correlations between behaviours referring to the same trait were consistently lower than when these records of behaviour occurrences were noted after the behaviours had taken place (that is, memory-based ratings of behaviours). He argued that the higher correlations could have resulted from ‘logical presuppositions in the minds of raters rather than actual behaviour’ (Newcomb, 1931: 288).

A study by Levy and Dugan (1960) attempts to resolve some of these issues by linking these findings to the person-perception literature. Referring to the halo effect and the logical error they suggest that ‘from an analysis of the nature of constant errors or intercorrelations found in trait ratings, information might be obtained concerning the nature of certain aspects of person perception.’ This conclusion is based on the following reasoning: ‘the correlations might arise because the traits are not independent from each other from the stand-point of the perceptual processes involved in making the judgments, but rather represent specific instances of a more limited number of dimensions of judgment or social perception’ (1960: 21). In their study, Levy and Dugan asked subjects to rate photographs of 225 white males on fifteen bipolar scales, such as ‘good–bad’, ‘kind–cruel’, ‘warm–cold’. In examining the inter-correlational structure between the bipolar scales they attributed high correlations to ‘the existence of certain dimensions of perception which were responsible for the correlations that were obtained’ (1960: 22). The factor-analytically obtained dimensions are seen as representations of ‘certain major dimensions of social
perception’. Interestingly enough though, neither the design of their study nor their data permit such a conclusion. The alternative hypothesis that they entertain and finally reject is the possibility of interpreting the findings as relationships between trait terms that have emerged as a function of ‘the synonymity or logical implication or true relationship between the terms obtained’ (1960: 22).

There are a number of different studies (for example, Tuples and Christal, 1961; Norman, 1963) employing different procedural paradigms such as asking subjects to rate their peers, while varying the relative acquaintance between the subject and the target (that is, peer) from three days to three years. The questionnaires used in such studies are personality inventories. Originally, the data from these studies, which yielded stable and consistent factorial structures over widely differing samples of subjects, were interpreted as reflecting the organization of these attributes in the targets (cf. Norman, 1963: 581). Tuples and Christal (1961), using a number of ratee samples and experimental conditions, find a consistent structure solution and suggest that this structural consistency may reflect ‘five fundamental meaning concepts’ applying to the person terms they employed in their study. Their report is in fact regarded as the origin of what has more recently been termed the ‘big five’ (Goldberg, 1981). However, this more recent interpretation is in terms of five robust factors of personality, that is as a representation of personality (cf. also Digman and Takemoto-Chock, 1981; Peabody, 1987; inter alia).

Mulaik’s (1963, 1964) research appears to be the first to suggest a clear link between the so-called structures of personality inventories (that is, source traits or types, traits) which are supposed to represent the ‘structure of the personality of individuals’ and ‘the role of conventional linguistic usage [of these person terms] in determining the correlation between trait rating scales’ (1964: 507). Mulaik, in his 1964 study, employed three independent groups of raters to judge a series of traits as they apply to: (a) ‘real’ persons; (b) stereotypes; and (c) twenty traits’ meanings (person terms). He found that the three inter-correlational matrices had over 60 per cent of common variance despite the fact that the types of judgement involved were distinctly different, as were the objects of judgement. From these findings he infers that the obtained structural patterns were imposed through semantic properties that were prevalent in judges, rather than by some properties of the objects of judgement. He concludes that ‘being able to show high correlations between factor scores computed from trait ratings of persons and factor scores computed from physiological measures of the same persons will not prove that trait factors are source traits’
Mulaik's objection is to the type of position represented, for example, by Cattell (1946: 27), who maintains that factors 'promise for us to be the real structural influences underlying personality which it is necessary for us to deal with in developmental problems, psychosomatics, and problems of dynamic integration'. Mulaik concludes that his 'results strongly indicate a reinterpretation of the results of factor analytic studies of personality based upon trait ratings by observers. The traits, heretofore thought to be linked by processes in persons rated, may be linked in reality in the minds of raters by linguistic convention' (1964). Similarly, Passini and Norman (1966) demonstrated that subjects' ratings of peers gave rise to factor solutions which were highly comparable, despite the fact that subjects' acquaintance with the target of judgement varied from considerable to barely any at all. On the basis of their study they inferred that 'all that was available to the raters was whatever they carried in their heads concerning the way and degree to which personality traits are organized in people generally' (1966: 47). Additional studies (for example, Norman and Goldberg, 1966; Kuusinen, 1969a, b) also support the above conclusions and suggest that the degree of invariance in the structure of intertrait correlations is not a function of the objects to be rated; is not affected by temporal variation; and displays considerable interindividual agreement.

A number of researchers have subsequently attempted to draw the more radical implications for personality from the idea that the relations between trait are mediated by 'linguistic convention'. The tenor of these developments is the notion of bias. Of these D'Andrade's (1965) study is the first and probably the most important. This is mainly because of the variation it introduced to the empirical paradigm and consequently to the development of this problem in the 1970s and 1980s. He was able to demonstrate that by asking subjects to rate the semantic similarity (or dissimilarity) in meaning between person-descriptive terms it is possible to reproduce a factorial structure comparable to the one which Norman (1963) obtained from peer ratings. In a short study he further demonstrated that the interscale correlational structure of a personality inventory obtained in a clinical sample (Lorr and McNair, 1962) can be largely accounted for by the semantic similarity judgements between inventory items as provided by a normal adult sample. The conclusions he reaches on the basis of these demonstrations are similar to those reached by Mulaik (1963, 1964).

Shweder (for example, 1982) has drawn out the broader implications of the conclusion that the obtained relations between person-descriptive terms are mediated by language conventions. He
argues that ‘most personality classifications derived from memory based assessment procedures can be reproduced from conceptual association judgments’ (1982: 73). These include a wide array, as Shweder (1982) notes. For example, the factor-analytic classification of personality and interpersonal behaviour (Bales, 1970) and the factor-analytic classification of maternal personality (Sears, Maccoby and Levin, 1957) have both been reproduced by Shweder (1975). The alpha factor of the MMPI has been reproduced by Shweder (1977), *inter alia*. These types of findings, which cover a broad range of domains, appear to suggest that taxonomic models of personality are replicable by asking for judgements of similarity in meaning for terms that appear in inventories. Irrespective of whether the empirical procedures are external or internal judgements, the general argument advanced by Shweder and D’Andrade (for example, 1980) is that when one is using memory-based assessment procedures then subjects will confuse ‘what is like what’ (semantic similarity) with ‘what goes with what’ (actual co-occurrences of properties, traits or behaviours). The reception of this so-called ‘systematic-distortion hypothesis’ has however not been completely unequivocal (cf. for detail: Block, Weiss and Thorne, 1979; Lamiel, Foss and Cavenee, 1980; Romer and Revelle, 1984; Semin and Greenslade, 1985; Weiss and Mendelson, 1986; *inter alia*).

There has been a growing research tradition emerging parallel to and independent of these critical developments and influenced largely by the ‘five fundamental meaning concepts’ (Tupes and Christal, 1961; Norman, 1963). These developments have pursued the idea that this factorial ‘discovery’ is a representation of the dimensions of personality. These factors have recently been relabelled extraversion–introversion, friendly compliance–hostile noncompliance, will, neuroticism or anxiety, and openness to experience (Digman and Inouye, 1986).² Most of this work is grounded on the premise that natural languages should have evolved the necessary terms for all fundamental differences and that an analysis of language would therefore provide a comprehensive representation of the personality terms, namely traits. This is the guiding idea which initiated the research by Allport and Odbert (1936) and Cattell (1946). Goldberg (1981, 1982) in a rigorous and exhaustive analysis of trait terms obtained results with a striking resemblance to the original Tupes and Christal research. In fact, as Digman and Inouye note, ‘If a large number of rating scales are used and if the scope of the scales is very broad, the domain of personality is almost completely accounted for by five robust factors’ (1986: 116).

An interesting aspect of these robust findings is that it does not
matter whether the empirical procedures involved 'external' or 'internal judgements', or variations in the degree of acquaintance between rater and ratee (for example, Passini and Norman, 1966; Norman and Goldberg, 1966; Digman and Takemoto-Chock, 1981; McCrae and Costa, 1985). Digman and Takemoto-Chock (1981), for example, reanalysed the data from six studies (Cattell, 1946; Norman, 1963; Tupes and Christal, 1961; inter alia). They used the same factor-analytic technique and arrived at the same five factors that accounted for the domain across the six studies, despite the possible suggestion that more than five may be necessary to handle the complete data (see also Peabody and Goldberg, 1989).

An interesting feature in the interpretation of these research findings is that the respective proponents entertain distinctly different accounts as exclusive possibilities in accounting for the systematic findings that were being repeatedly noted in diverse studies. On the one hand, we observe findings that are regarded as a logical error or halo effect reflecting biasing properties of the mind—for instance, a reflection of certain perceptual properties. Similarly, the systematic-distortion hypothesis points to a confusion between 'what goes with what' and 'what is like what'. Those interpretations that refer to possible properties of language generally regard the influence of language on judgements in the personality domain as essentially a confound. In the earlier work, this was in large part due to the psychological approach which was concerned with establishing principles that are free from any cultural elements such as language or linguistic conventions, since these were regarded as psychologically uninformative. A third possibility was that the relations observed between the person-descriptive terms constitute a representation of personality. The point is that these three possible accounts—bias, language conventions and representation of personality—are treated independently and the only critical work to cast these as alternatives against each other was carried out during the 1960s. Most of the subsequent work, particularly within the 'big five' tradition, disregards these issues.

A Constructionist Resolution

In order to have a clearer conception of how social constructionism would address this controversy it is necessary to understand some of the central features of ordinary language. Language has a fundamental role to play as the medium on which descriptions or characterizations of persons (and their social behaviour) are configured, as well as a medium of communication between people. An important characteristic of ordinary language is that it is a
medium that generalizes over different actors and observers who occupy the same place at different times or different places at the same time. This property of language, namely to generalize over specific instances, and over different persons in time and space is referred to as intersubjectivity and is integrally linked to social interaction.

In order to transmit some experience or content of consciousness to another person, there is no other path than to ascribe the content to a known class, a known group of phenomena, and as we know this necessarily requires generalization. Thus it turns out that social interaction necessarily presupposes generalization and the development of word meaning, i.e., generalization becomes possible with the development of social interaction. Thus, higher, uniquely human forms of psychological social interaction are possible only because human thinking reflects reality in a generalized way. (Vygotski, 1956: 51)

In a sense intersubjectivity refers to what might be termed ‘socially invariant information’ that mediates between individuals. To illustrate, when I am talking to somebody, I often wish to convey an intention, an idea, a directive or an impression. In order to be able to do so, I have to resort to some medium that is shared, abstracted, ‘objective’, in short, intersubjective. On the one hand, we have a medium that enables human interaction and permits the communication of subjective intentions. Yet, in the process of interaction and communication, the medium is also reproduced (that is, language as an institution). Thus human communication reproduces the socially invariant structures or properties of language (for example, syntax, semantics) that simultaneously allow us to communicate our subjective intentions. A central insight from this perspective is that intersubjectivity precedes subjectivity and that ‘self understanding is connected integrally to the understanding of others’ (Giddens, 1976: 19).

Language as an institution exists as a ‘structure’, syntactic and semantic. This is something that is traced or identified as those ruleful aspects or consistencies in what people say in the speech acts they perform. Therefore, when we refer to syntax, as one example of such regularities, what we are referring to is the ‘reproduction’ of similar elements that are noted over speech acts. Such rules, for example, syntax, in turn generate the totality of speech acts which is the spoken language. Similarly, if one were to think about the concrete case of, for instance, trait terms, then one can regard these terms as idealized semantic abstractions that are both the preconditions and consequences of the use of person terms in everyday communication.

In such a view, the issue of intersubjectivity can be understood
and conceptualized with reference to those temporally relatively invariant social products that are reproduced in communication. These socially invariant features of language are neither invented by each individual nor discovered in the individual's independent interaction with 'nature'. Nor are they inherited in the form of instincts or unconditional reflexes. Instead, they are 'tools' by virtue of being part of a socio-cultural milieu, and tools which carry information about our world in general and persons in particular. It is in that sense that knowledge and information about persons is configured in the medium of language. In that sense, one can talk about the idealized meanings of person terms, such as the meaning of traits. These are for instance the types of meanings that one would find in a dictionary.³ In the abstracted sense, a term embodies an idealized meaning with no reference to a concrete person or for that matter a person-in-context (cf. Semin, 1989; Semin and Chassein, 1985).

Such idealized knowledge structures obviously have no pragmatic reference. In contrast, 'meaning in use' or meaning in pragmatic contexts is situated or 'indexical' (cf. Garfinkel and Sacks, 1970; Mehan and Wood, 1975). 'Pragmatic meaning is defined as meaning that is dependent on context, while the semantic value of a sign [in our case a trait or a person description] is the meaning, or notional core, that it has apart from contextual factors' (Meertz, 1985: 4).

Having presented relevant features of ordinary language from a constructionist point of view we can now turn to an assessment of the research controversy. To recap: the systematic findings that are noted in the relations of person descriptive terms are interpreted either as a systematic bias of the perceptual apparatus; a representation of personality; or the product of language conventions. The critical issue that this excursus on the features of ordinary language points to is that the robust empirical findings must reflect the semantic relations between person descriptive terms. This becomes more evident if one considers the characteristics of the methodological procedure by which these results are obtained. One feature of the statistical methods that are employed throughout this research that we have reviewed is that they decontextualize the meanings of the different terms. This is mainly due to the fact that the statistical methods that are employed are mainly designed to find the common properties of data points rather than idiosyncratic variations. Thus a contention that would be advanced by a social-constructionist perspective is that these regular findings are in fact no more or no less than idealized abstractions capturing decontextualized semantic relationships. The main issue in the research we briefly reviewed along with the three alternative positions that have
been furnished to account for the regularities in the representations of person-descriptive terms is an attempt to come to terms with the relationships between the terms. This is essentially a representation of the semantic domains. Our reanalysis suggests that this type of structural relationship is a representation of an abstracted semantic space. In fact, if one develops an index of semantic association between person terms (such as adjectives) from a dictionary (Semin, 1989), without utilizing any subjects, then it can be shown that the types of associations one obtains from a dictionary reproduce perfectly the empirical results of tasks obtained by ‘internal judgements’. Semin (1989) demonstrates that 60 per cent of the variance of semantic similarity judgements are accounted for by the meaning relationships uncovered by a word-association index he developed to examine dictionary meanings. But the question remains as to whether these semantic relationships are only language properties, or also biasing tendencies or are for that matter representations of personality (cf. Semin, 1989; Semin and Chassein, 1985).

We can proceed to answer this question by considering an argument advanced by Vygotski. He suggests that external activity, namely social processes mediated by, for example, language, provide the key to understanding the emergence of internal functioning. In this view:

It is necessary that everything internal in higher forms was external, that is, for others it was what it now is for oneself. Any higher mental function necessarily goes through an external stage in its development because it is initially a social function. This is the centre of the whole problem of internal–external behaviour... When we speak of a process, ‘external’ means social. Any higher function was external because it was social before becoming an internal, truly mental function. (1981a: 162)

That is, the dichotomy between the internal and external in this view becomes an unnecessary one. ‘The very mechanism underlying higher social functions is a copy from social interaction; all higher mental functions are internalized social relationships... Even when we turn to mental [internal] processes, their nature remains quasi social, in their private sphere, human beings retain the functions of social interaction’ (Vygotski, 1981b: 184). Thus, in this view, the question whether the robust structure that emerges is a property of the mind (implicit personality theory), a property of persons (personality structure) or a property of a social institution (language and language conventions) is in fact a non-issue. These aspects are inseparable from each other in that they are inextricably linked to each other. So far we have considered assessing the types of relationships recovered in analyses of internal and external
judgements and the potential meanings that have been ascribed to these along with a social-constructionist interpretation. The conclusion that we have reached is that the relationships recovered by such analyses are representations of semantic domains. The next question that is related to this assessment is what the actual content of these semantic domains correspond to. It is possible to argue that what is being recovered in taxonomic approaches to personality is basically semantic domains. Yet it is possible to argue that the manner in which this content is organized is inaccessible to human consciousness. One could therefore argue that this type of discovery, for instance, the ‘big five’, represent domains of personality that represent true advancements insofar as they capture features of personality that are inaccessible in everyday life. In the following section, we examine the relationship between representations of persons, for instance the domains of personality described by the ‘big five’, and lay representations of persons. The question which guides this section is specifically content-focused: what is the relationship between the contents of the types of representation of personality we have discussed so far and theories that are found in everyday life? Do scientific models of personality supersede everyday conceptions?

Trait Taxonomies and Ordinary Language: Perspectives on Content

The question about the similarity and difference between the contents of scientific and everyday theories is predicated on the nature of the relationship between the technical languages in personality work (for example, models of personality) and everyday conceptions of personality (Semin, 1987). Ordinary or natural language is central to meaningful social behaviour, as it is to communication in social interaction. By implication, psychological research in personality is impossible without resorting to ordinary language. Indeed, natural or ordinary language permeates all phases of our activities as psychologists, from the instructions to the presentation of the material, to the nature of most of the material itself, and to its presentation in the form of scientific discourse. Therefore psychologists, regardless of their area of specialization, cannot construct a technical metalanguage which is independent of the categories in ordinary language. Essentially, the execution of any type of psychological research with humans demands communication. In particular cases, such as interviews, questionnaire-based investigations, paper and pencil tests or experimental studies with verbal material only, research takes place as an actual interaction
between people and in particular experimenter–investigator and subject–participant. However, such studies of human behaviour depend on a mutuality of perspectives and shared knowledge (Semin and Manstead, 1979).

The problem to be considered in this section is the degree to which models of personality, such as the ‘big five’ or Eysenck’s two-dimensional model, can be regarded as reproducing everyday conceptions of personality. The argument from a social-constructionist perspective is that society is only possible to the extent that interacting selves share the same underlying symbolic order. Consequently, the second point is that psychological realities must always refer to the corresponding cultural and historical background upon which they are predicated. What are the implications of this for theory and empirical findings in personality work? The major implication of the argument leads to the third point which is that personality work, in order to develop models or theories that are ‘empirically’ testable can only do so by accessing historically and culturally constituted social representations (Moscovici, 1981, 1984). The data that are collected are at the same time part and parcel of a social world, which is integral in the constitution of the psychological reality of the individuals who share it. It can therefore be assumed that the reality of everyday psychology is constitutively and reflexively involved in the production of scientific models in psychology to the extent that proposed models constitute empirically verifiable social representations. Thus, paradoxically, the appropriateness of scientific models will depend on the degree to which they adequately capture the representations of socially constituted realities.

A considerable body of evidence has been accumulated over the years lending direct or ‘indirect’ support for the contentions advanced here. The indirect evidence is research that is not explicitly set within the theoretical perspective outlined here, but is concerned with questions such as the fakability of personality inventories (for example, Brown and LaFaro, 1968; Power and MacRae, 1971), examinations of lay conceptions of intelligence (for example, Sternberg et al., 1981; Jaeger and Sitarek, 1985; Wagner and Sternberg, 1985), or attribution-theoretical work in personality (Pawlik and Buse, 1979).

A number of studies addressing these issues directly set out with the following general hypothesis: there is a conceptual overlap between ordinary language and scientific propositions due to the interdependence between culturally given psychological realities and scientific psychological theorizing. To demonstrate this hypothesis the methodological approach that is adopted employs
procedures by which the overlap in content between scientific and ordinary language propositions can be established. The type of question would thus be the following: are naive subjects able to generate, discriminate, and/or classify the same phenotypic behaviours, attributes, and so on to a given supercategory or dimension (for example, extraversion) of a trait-type model? There are a number of studies that have examined this question.

If the social-constructionist arguments are correct, then lay persons should be able to discriminate successfully between items of diagnostic instruments (for example, the EPI; Eysenck and Eysenck, 1975), that is they should be able to discriminate items belonging to a given scale category from those which do not, in any personality inventory. Semin, Rosch, Krolage and Chassein (1981) examined two multiphasic personality inventories, one consisting exclusively of behavioural items (Freiburg Personality Inventory – FPI; Fahrenberg, Selg and Hampel, 1973) and the other solely of adjectives (Eigenschafts Woerter Liste – EWL; Janke and Debus, 1978). Four subscales (aggressiveness, excitability, depressiveness and inhibition) were selected from the first inventory and a further four (excitability, anger, anxiety and depressiveness) from the second one. The 200 subjects participating in this study were divided randomly into eight groups of twenty-five, one for each scale category. They received either the complete FPI or the complete EWL and were asked to identify those items in the inventory which belonged to a given scale category. As expected, subjects were able to discriminate systematically and with above-chance probability those items belonging to the supercategories. Further corroboration of the ability of lay subjects accurately to identify items belonging to specific personality domains comes from a study by Furnham (1984), who showed that subjects were able to identify with reasonable accuracy those items in the Eysenck (Eysenck and Eysenck, 1975) measure of neuroticism.

These types of studies proceed by supplying the scale-category label in advance and examine whether subjects can discriminate items, thus providing one possible way of establishing ‘identity’ relationships between psychological and ordinary language representations of personality. A possible objection is that if subjects were not provided with categories in advance, then they would be less likely to come up with a classificatory system. Indeed, this is similar to the argument that Eysenck advances in favour of ‘scientific taxonomies’. He argues that the

demand for one typology instead of a whole collection of different typologies is, in essence, a demand for a scientific methodology which will enable us to test claims advanced for any specific system; the
essential incompleteness of the typologists’ achievements lay in their failure to provide a technique of verification by means of which their claims can be subjected to genuine scientific validation. It is only through the method of factor analysis that such verification can be done. (1970b: 35)

The assertion is that by using psychometric procedures a model of personality can be developed which supersedes ‘unsystematic’ commonsense or ordinary language descriptions, in terms of its abstraction, generality and validity. If, however, as is assumed from a constructionist perspective, this ‘systematic’ model is already contained in the normative conventions that are part and parcel of everyday life, subjects should actually be able to generate the structure of an inventory without being provided with the scale-category label. Semin, Chassein, Rosch and Krolage (1984) employed the short form of the FPI (Fahrenberg, Selg and Hampel, 1973). Each of the sixty-seven items belonging to the twelve subscales of the inventory were written on separate index cards and presented to forty subjects. The method employed was a card-sorting task (Miller, 1969). Subjects had to put those cards which they thought were similar in meaning into the same group. There were no restrictions in terms of the number of groups they could construct, nor in terms of items per group. On the basis of this procedure an inter-item proximity matrix was obtained. A second sample of fifty-eight subjects filled out the FPI-K from a self-referent perspective. From this sample the inter-item correlations were obtained. The structure of the inter-item correlations and the proximity matrix obtained by the ‘subjective’ classifications of participants were compared by means of a multidimensional scaling procedure which showed that the two matrices had 75 per cent common variance. That is, the independent subjective orderings of the items replicated the personality inventory structure. Semin and Chassein (1985), employing a similar methodology, were able to establish a more general case for a generic theoretical taxonomy of personality (see Eysenck, 1970a) showing that such generic models are contained in ordinary language propositions.

Another way of examining the social-constructionist argument consists in asking lay persons to generate statements about the characteristics of specific types in trait-type models. These lay statements can then be examined with respect to their ‘identity relation’ to the scientific model in question, namely the degree of conceptual overlap. For example, Semin, Rosch and Chassein (1981) asked thirty-nine subjects to describe what they thought were the attributes of a typical extravert and a further thirty-nine subjects what they thought were the attributes of a typical introvert. Based on a content analysis of the items generated by lay
people these authors selected the most frequently mentioned
descriptions of extraverts and introverts and presented these
items to a further sample who had to judge how typical each item
was for a typical extravert or introvert. The twelve most typical
items respectively for an extravert and introvert were selected and a
twenty-four-item scale was constructed. This constituted a lay scale
of introversion–extraversion. When this scale was administered
to a new sample along with the EPI it was shown that the ‘lay scale’
was as powerful in discriminating between individuals as was the
EPI on extraversion–introversion. Furnham (1984) conducted a study
similar to this examining neuroticism. His subjects generated
over 400 behaviours/traits which he reduced to 100 on the basis of a
content analysis. These items were then rated for their typicality for a
neurotic person on seven-point scales. On the basis of a qualitative
analysis Furnham concludes that the ‘10 most typical character-
istics appear to fit well with explicit theories of neuroticism’ (1984:
100).

It would appear to be the case that in a number of domains lay
subjects’ representations of specific personality domains (such as
extraversion, introversion, neuroticism) overlap considerably with
the scientific definition of these domains. Another aspect of trait-
type models such as Eysenck’s is their dimensionality – for example,
extraversion–introversion. It may be the case that subjects have
access to specific domains but do they represent these domains in
dimensional relations as in the case of extraversion–introversion?
Semin and Rosch (1981) explored this issue in a study using items
from the extraversion and introversion domains, generated by lay
persons. They used an attribute-inference paradigm, which involves
giving subjects a stimulus item (such as an item describing
introversion) and asking which of a list of items apply – or do not
apply – to this person (response items are extraversion–introversion
items). Indeed, they found a near-perfect symmetry in inferences. If
the stimulus item is an item from the extraversion domain, then all
extravert items are endorsed as applying, and vice versa for a
stimulus item from the introversion domain. This study demonstrates
not only that knowledge about personality is organized in discrete
propositions relating specific behaviours and traits peculiar to a
specific type, but also that ordinary language contains propositions
about implicative relationships. These take the form: if person \(A\) is
\(X\), then all \(x\)'s (\(x_1\) to \(x_n\)) apply. Contained in this are also relational
propositions, namely, if \(X\), then not \(Y\) and thus all implicative
statements belonging to \(Y\) (\(y_1\) to \(y_m\)) are seen as not applicable to
the person as well. Thus dimensional propositions observed, for
example, in extraversion–introversion are also found in ordinary
language.
The research we have presented so far has dealt with manifest behaviours (such as likes going to parties) or imputed psychological qualities (such as impulsive). One might reasonably argue that although this type of work is prominent in trait taxonomies there is other work such as Eysenck’s that makes assumptions about the genotypic foundations of trait-type models. Thus one can contend that although there might be a conceptual overlap between the content of scientific and everyday theories of personality, this remains restricted to manifest or psychological properties of persons and that it is essentially the biological or genotypic foundations of personality models that sets them apart from lay conceptions of personality. The genotypic level lends scientific models of personality their special status (for example, Eysenck, 1983). Intuitively, this level of analysis not only denies lay conceptions the availability of such higher-order, typically psychogenetic models, but it also denies lay conceptions the possibility of entertaining propositions about what types of genotypic property is associated with which types of content (manifest or psychological properties). Such propositions relate to specific and intricate relationships between differences in cortical arousal for extraverts and introverts which are mediated by the reticular formation, and rely on postulated differences in resting levels of arousal. These differences are demonstrated in a number of experimental studies testing behavioural differences derived from this hypothetical model concerning the relationships between postulated cortical processes and behavioural proclivities. Semin and Krahe (1987) examined the commonsense availability of experimental relationships derived from genotypic propositions and their behavioural (that is, phenotypic) statements within Eysenck’s E–I trait-type model in two studies utilizing an attribute-inference paradigm. In the first study typically genotype-based statements about either extraverts or introverts served as the stimulus conditions (for example, ‘recalls tasks better some time after learning them rather than immediately’ – introvert genotypic item; or ‘is a person who can tolerate pain relatively easily’ – extravert genotypic item) describing two independently manipulated target persons and phenotypic statements derived from the EPI as dependent variables (for example, ‘is a person who stops and thinks things over before doing anything’ – phenotypic introvert item; or ‘likes going out a lot’ – phenotypic extravert item). This order was reversed in the second experiment. Results from both studies show a high degree of accuracy in subjects’ inferences, suggesting that lay persons have well-formed conceptions about personality containing ‘higher-order’ psychogenetic propositions corresponding to Eysenck’s trait-type model.
A series of highly interesting studies on lay conceptions of intelligence have been conducted by Sternberg and his colleagues (Sternberg, Conway, Ketron and Bernstein, 1981; Sternberg, 1985; Wagner and Sternberg, 1985). These studies, which are primarily designed as descriptive studies, are concerned with reconstructions of the ‘form and content of people’s informal theories’ (Sternberg et al., 1981: 37–8). In part of this research Sternberg et al. (1981) first of all asked lay persons to generate behaviours characteristic of intelligence, academic intelligence and everyday intelligence or unintelligence. They used the final 250 behaviours extracted from the generated items for a number of purposes, but among other things for self-ratings on intelligence and compared these self-ratings with IQ scores. They found that ‘the three kinds of self-rated intelligence were ... significantly correlated with IQ; People’s conceptions of themselves were related to their objective test performance. The highest correlation with IQ was that for rated academic intelligence’ (1981: 47).

In a more recent paper Sternberg (1985) contrasts lay theories of intelligence, creativity and wisdom with explicit theory-based measures (see Experiment 3). He concludes:

Correlations of scores from implicit-theory-based measures with scores from explicit-theory-based measures showed both convergent and discriminant validity. The prototype scores correlated with the psychometric tests with which they were supposed to correlate and did not correlate with the psychometric tests with which they were not supposed to correlate. Thus, implicit theories of intelligence and wisdom do correspond substantially to explicit theories. (1985: 619)

Similar results are reported by Jaeger and Sitarek, who examine lay conceptions of ability. They compare the Berlin Intelligence-Structure Model (BIS; Jaeger, 1982, 1984) with lay conceptions of abilities and intelligence. This study shows that the ability structure available to lay conceptions yields concepts of practical and social intelligence above and beyond those provided in the BIS.

Conclusions

While it is usual for science or particular areas of science to incorporate theories, concepts or models that are derived from or rely upon commonsense constructions it is often the case that such reliance is observed in the early stages of the development of sciences. However true this may be in the case of natural sciences, in the case of psychological work there has to be a clear link to commonsense constructions at least at one level of the scientific activity. This is necessitated by the fact that our psychological
reality is largely guided by the way we construct the world. Furthermore, in most of our dealings as psychologists, in personality work or otherwise, we rely on everyday constructs for at least our data-collection activities (instructions and so on), and more often than not the data that we collect are themselves products of everyday knowledge. To that extent, we should always be more explicit about the links between our activities of theory-construction, data-collection, hypothesis-testing and so on and their link to ordinary language and the theories and assumptions embedded in ordinary language. The point about scientific activities is that they should in the final instance not merely paraphrase assumptions and propositions that are available in everyday life, but transcend these in some manner or to make some discoveries. This is not to say that taxonomic work in personality has not provided us with new insights. Nevertheless, a social-constructionist approach allows us to put these insights into specific perspectives, emphasizing the language-driven aspects of the taxonomic models as well as the everyday-knowledge-based aspects of the contents of these theories. In that sense, a constructionist approach sharpens the types of questions that may be asked in a further step. There are a number of options that present themselves in this context. One of them is to examine the properties of interpersonal language (for example, Semin and Fiedler, 1988) and explore the situated use of these terms in discourse with a view to uncovering their cognitive implications (for example, Maass et al., 1989; Semin and Fiedler, 1989). What appears to be important from the perspective presented here is a more serious consideration of the role played by language in personality and an invitation to investigate the language of personality, not only in the abstract but also in everyday discourse as the neglected counterpart to much of the research discussed here.

Notes

1. The link between ‘logical errors’, ‘biases’ and the question concerning the formation of impressions about personality is made explicitly by Solomon Asch (1946: 260). These issues were thus introduced to an emerging and broader social-psychological tradition which was to form the area of person perception. It is with this link to the impression formation work and, more generally, to implicit personality theory (cf. Bruner and Tagiuri, 1954: 641, 649) that the research which developed in the early 1960s engendered a debate between theories based on the so-called ‘structures’ of personality and theories based on (what may be termed) ‘perceptions of personality’ in everyday life.

2. The ‘precise’ labelling of these factors is the object of some debate among the cognizantis. For instance, Goldberg and his colleagues (such as Peabody and Goldberg, 1989) term these factors: I Surgency (bold–timid); II Agreeableness
(warm–cold); III Conscientiousness (thorough–careless); IV Emotional Stability (relaxed–tense); and V Culture (intelligent–unintelligent).

3. Although even the dictionary specifies a number of variations of meaning as a function of different contexts. The simplest instance being warm in the context of a person judgement acquires a different semantic value in contrast to a reference to a cup of milk.

References


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