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## Lay conceptions of personality: eliciting tiers of a scientific conception of personality

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### Abstract

*Two studies are reported which examine the availability of scientific propositions of personality in lay conceptions of personality. It is argued from a social constructivist perspective that models of personality must derive from and refer to lay conceptions of persons. Eysenck's trait-type model of introversion-extraversion, containing specific propositions about phenotypic and genotypic differences between extraverts and introverts, was utilized as the scientific model of personality and its availability in lay conceptions of personality was examined in two studies. In the first study, subjects were presented with a genotypic characterization of either an introvert or an extravert target person and asked to infer corresponding phenotypic differences. In the second study, the inference process was reversed with subjects being asked to infer genotypic characteristics of introverts versus extraverts on the basis of phenotypic target person descriptions of the two types. Results from both studies show a high degree of accuracy in subjects' inferences, suggesting that laypersons have well-formed conceptions about personality containing 'higher-order' psychogenetic propositions corresponding to Eysenck's trait-type model. The implications of the findings for theory construction are discussed.*

### INTRODUCTION

A substantial proportion of present day work on social cognition has derived from examinations of implicit psychological theories in everyday life, i.e. lay theories (*cf.* Bruner and Tagiuri, 1954; Cronbach, 1955; Heider, 1958; Schneider, 1973; Wegner

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and Vallacher, 1977; Laucken, 1974, *inter alia*). Much of the work which has resulted from such examinations has been concerned with *process features* of social cognition characterizing attributions and information processing. These approaches are concerned with an examination of presumed processes mediating the encoding, storage, and retrieval of social knowledge about persons (*cf.* Ostrom, 1984). More recently, the relationship between the *content* of psychological theories and lay theories has become a focus of interest (e.g. Heckhausen, 1976; Rosch, Chassein, Semin and Krolage, 1984; Semin and Chassein, 1985; Semin, Rosch and Chassein, 1981; Semin, Chassein, Rosch and Krolage, 1984; Smedslund, 1978, 1982b; Sternberg, Conway, Ketron and Bernstein, 1981, *inter alia*). In large part, this type of inquiry has arisen from considerations about the reciprocal relationship between psychological and lay models of behaviour. Examination of this reciprocal relation has addressed the questions of how, how much, and in which way lay theories contribute to the formulation of psychological theories. Lay theories of behaviour and of psychological properties of humans contribute to the shaping of the behaviour and activities of individuals in everyday life. Since psychological models attempt to explain these behaviours and activities, 'reconstructions' of lay models may be regarded as essential to psychological formulations. These formulations must contain interpolative or extrapolative reference to lay theories even if these references do not constitute part of the formal theory. Indeed, if one were to take a general interactionist perspective on lay and psychological models of behaviour, i.e. that they stand in a relation of mutual influence (*cf.* Berger, 1966; Gergen, 1973, 1982), then one can assume that behaviour can be influenced and modified to the extent that psychological theories are assimilated by lay theories (*cf.* Moscovici, 1961), which in turn should, at least theoretically, lead to a consequent modification of the psychological model, etc. It would thus appear to be the case that comparative examinations of the content of lay and psychological models in specific domains is highly relevant to psychological theorizing in general.

The particular research reported here focuses on a comparison of conceptions of personality as they exist in everyday life as 'a set of concepts, statements and explanations [about personality] originating in everyday life in the course of inter-individual communications' (Moscovici, 1981, p. 181) and a scientific conception of personality, namely Eysenck's trait-type approach to personality. In Sternberg *et al.*'s (1981) words, 'The data of interest are people's communications (in whatever form) regarding their notions as to the nature of . . .' (p. 38), in our case, personality. This type of question has been prominent in recent years not only with respect to conceptions of personality (*cf.* Rosch *et al.*, 1984; Semin and Chassein, 1985; Semin *et al.*, 1981; Semin *et al.*, 1984), but also people's conceptions of intelligence (e.g. Jäger and Sitarek, 1985; Neisser, 1981; Sternberg *et al.*, 1981), attitude-behaviour consistency (Six and Krahe, 1984) as well as specific psychological theories (*cf.* Smedslund, 1978, 1982a,b). In a related vein, a controversy has developed over the accuracy of implicit personality theories whereby accuracy is defined and analysed in terms of the correspondence between estimated and empirically obtained trait interrelations (Jackson and Striker, 1982; Mirels, 1982; Tzeng and Tzeng, 1982). The present paper suggests a different perspective on the 'accuracy' of lay conceptions which is concerned with the exact nature of the relationship between lay theories on the one hand and scientific psychological theories on the other.

The question addressed in this paper arises from a constructivist perspective which

regards psychological processes as social products (*cf.* Berger, 1966; Gergen, 1985, Semin & Chassein, 1985; Semin & Manstead, 1983, *inter alia*). This perspective suggests that perceived realities always refer to and are derived from a corresponding social background upon which they are predicated. Such an approach has major implications for the interface between socially shared knowledge about personality and knowledge as represented in scientific models of personality. In order to develop a model of personality a personality theorist has to empirically test its propositions in a socially constituted and shared reality by which the psychological reality of the individuals sharing that world is shaped. It can therefore be argued that the reality of an everyday psychology (*cf.* Laucken, 1974; Smedslund, 1985; Wegner and Vallacher, 1977, *inter alia*) is integrally involved in the production of scientific models of personality in so far as such models of personality represent propositions that are verified through the empirical reality of everyday life (*cf.* Berger, 1966).

One may argue that in the case of both trait-type models, e.g. Eysenck's work, and everyday conceptions of personality, one is concerned with propositions about persons. Both types of propositions are contained in the final instance in language statements. Trait-type approaches rely by and large upon verbal activity irrespective of whether this involves the development of questionnaires and objective measures or the demonstration of an array of meaningful empirical relationships in a wide variety of areas of psychological functioning. The specific propensity of a trait-type model such as Eysenck's is that it contains not only propositions about persons on a phenotypic level, but also on the genotypic level. There is evidence of conceptual overlap between the content of lay conceptions and Eysenck's model on a phenotypic level (*cf.* Furnham, 1984; Semin and Chassein, 1985; Semin, Rosch, Krolage, and Chassein, 1981). However, as it has been argued, it is the biological basis, i.e., the genotypic foundations of trait-type models, which provides them with their special scientific status (e.g. 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 which refer to genotypic-phenotypic links within the trait-type model. 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 postulating different resting levels of arousal. These differences are demonstrated in a number of experimental studies testing for behavioural differences derived from this model (*cf.* Eysenck, 1982, 1983).

In the two studies reported below, the object was to examine the availability of genotypic propositions and their related behavioural (i.e. phenotypic) statements derived from Eysenck's E-I trait-type model, in lay conceptions of persons. Essentially, an attribute inference task was utilized to examine the availability of both genotypic and phenotypic propositions in lay conceptions of persons. Availability was specified in the context of the first study as subjects' capability of correctly identifying the respective phenotypic characteristics corresponding to a target person, described either as a typical extravert or typical introvert in genotypic terms. In the second study, this order was reversed. The target person was described as either a typical extravert or introvert in phenotypic terms and the subjects' task consisted in identifying the corresponding genotypic characteristics which they thought applied to the target person.

## STUDY 1

## Method

*Subjects*

Forty-one undergraduate students at the University of Sussex, not majoring in psychology, participated in this study on an unpaid voluntary basis.

*The development of the stimulus materials*

To arrive at *genotypic* descriptions of the target person as a typical introvert or extravert, consistent and well-established findings about differences between introverts and extraverts were extracted from published work on introversion-extraversion by Eysenck and other investigators (*cf.* Eysenck, 1983; Geen, 1984; Monte, 1977). These were then presented in ordinary language descriptions. To ascertain the validity of these presentations, a clinical psychologist, who is a specialist in Eysenckian work, was asked to evaluate the ordinary language formulations so that these retained the meanings of the original propositions and could thus be regarded as accurate statements of the genotypic properties and differences between introverts and extraverts<sup>1</sup>.

On the basis of this procedure, a set of six characteristics was selected to describe genotypic propositions about introversion-extraversion. A list of these characteristics in both their introvert and extravert formulations is presented in Table 1.

*The independent variables.* The genotypic characteristics of an introvert or an extravert, arranged as two independent, brief personality descriptions of a target person 'A' (any sex reference was omitted), constituted the independent variables of the present study.

*The dependent variables.* The dependent variables consisted of twelve phenotypic characteristics, six of which described the typical extravert and six the typical introvert. These phenotypic characteristics were taken from the Eysenck Personality Inventory (EPI; Form A), by selecting those items which had the highest loadings on the

Table 1. Genotypic characteristics of introverts and extraverts

## Introvert

1. Is a person who is sensitive to sudden changes
2. Is a person whose brain functions require little stimulation to be activated
3. Recalls tasks better some time after learning them rather than immediately
4. Is not easily susceptible to fatigue in monotonous tasks
5. Is a person who does not tolerate loud noises
6. Is a person who is sensitive to pain

## Extravert

7. Is a person who is not very sensitive to sudden changes
8. Is a person whose brain functions require intensive stimulation to be activated
9. Recalls tasks better immediately after learning them than after some time has lapsed
10. Is susceptible to fatigue in monotonous tasks
11. Is a person who has a high tolerance for loud noises
12. Is a person who can tolerate pain relatively easily

<sup>1</sup>We would like to thank Dr. P. Mayo, Dip. Clin. Psych. for his kind help.

Table 2. Phenotypic characteristics of introverts and extraverts

## Introvert

1. Is a person who stops and thinks things over before doing anything (0.40)
2. Generally prefers reading to meeting people (0.71)
3. Is mostly quiet when with other people (0.62)
4. Usually finds it hard to really enjoy him/herself at a lively party (0.65)
5. Hates being in a crowd who play jokes on one another (0.49)
6. If there is something he/she wants to know about, he/she would rather look it up in a book than talk to somebody about it (0.54)

## Extravert

7. Is typically a person who generally does and says things quickly without stopping to think (-0.57)
8. Likes going out a lot (-0.63)
9. Can usually let him/herself go and enjoy him/herself a lot at a lively party (-0.74)
10. Often does things on the spur of the moment (-0.53)
11. Can easily get some life into a rather dull party (-0.48)
12. Other people think of this person as being very lively (-0.53)

Loadings on the E-factor of the EPI are given in parentheses.

'Extraversion' (E-) Factor (Eysenck and Eysenck, 1967). A list of the phenotypic descriptions used as dependent variables is provided in Table 2.

### Procedure

Two versions of the questionnaire were created. The first version utilizing the genotypic *introvert* target person as stimulus was completed by 21 subjects. The second version presented the genotypic *extravert* target person as stimulus and was administered to 20 subjects. Both versions contained the dependent measures in a randomized order. After reading the genotypic description, subjects were asked to 'indicate, on the basis of the above description of Person A, the degree to which each of the below characteristics would also be expected to apply to Person A'. They then rated each of the twelve phenotypic characteristics on a 7-point scale ranging from '0 = not at all characteristic of A' to '6 = typically characteristic of A'.

### Results and discussion

A one-way multivariate analysis of variance for target persons (extravert versus introvert) on the 12 dependent variables yielded an highly significant multivariate effect ( $F_{1,40} = 4.28; p < 0.001$ ) for target persons. An examination of the univariate effects shows that subjects consistently and significantly rated the six phenotypic introvert characteristics higher for the introvert genotype target person (*cf.* Table 3). In the case of the extravert genotype target person condition the reverse pattern is observed, again without exception (*cf.* Table 3). All 12 mean differences are in the expected direction. The findings of this study provide unambiguous support for the contention that lay conceptions of personality contain genotypic propositions about introversion-extraversion which facilitate correct inferences about the phenotypic differences between introverts and extraverts.

To carry the argument of the present study a step further, a second study was conducted reversing the inference task of the first study. In this study subjects were

Table 3. Mean differences for typicality ratings of phenotypic characteristics

Genotypic stimulus: $\bar{x}_1 - \bar{x}_2 (I/E)$			
Phenotypic characteristic: (cf. Table 2)			
1	-1.74*	7	1.92*
2	-2.08*	8	1.88*
3	-0.88†	9	2.31*
4	-1.23‡	10	1.58‡
5	-1.38‡	11	1.09‡
6	-1.24‡	12	1.41‡

Negative scores indicate higher typicality ratings for the introvert target person, positive scores indicate higher typicality ratings for the extravert target person.

\*  $p < 0.001$

†  $p < 0.01$

‡  $p < 0.05$

asked to infer genotypic dependent measures from a provision of stimulus information which depicted the target person in terms of either a phenotypic introvert or a phenotypic extravert.

## STUDY 2

### Method

#### Subjects

Forty undergraduate students (not majoring in psychology) at the University of Sussex participated in this study on an unpaid voluntary basis.

#### Procedure

The procedure in this study was identical to Study 1 with the exception that the two depictions of the target person (extravert versus introvert) were composed on the basis of the phenotypic characteristics of introverts and extraverts which were used as dependent variables in the first study (cf. Table 2). The genotypic characteristics serving as stimuli in the first study (cf. Table 1) represented the dependent variables in the present study. They were listed in a random order of presentation in the questionnaire. Nineteen subjects completed the questionnaire in the extravert target person condition and 21 subjects received the introvert target person condition.

### Results and discussion

As in Study 1, a multivariate analysis of variance was computed to examine the differences between the two groups on each of the 12 dependent variables. The multivariate effect of target person condition (introvert versus extravert) was highly significant ( $F_{1,39} = 28.87; p < 0.001$ ). An inspection of the means for each dependent measure shows that 10 out of the 12 mean differences were in the expected direction,

Table 4. Mean differences for typicality ratings of genotypic characteristics

Phenotypic stimulus: $\bar{x}_1 - \bar{x}_2$ (I/E)			
Genotypic characteristic: (cf. Table 1)			
1	-1.13*	7	0.43
2	1.57†	8	-0.46
3	-0.24	9	0.50
4	-2.15†	10	2.58†
5	-3.43†	11	4.15†
6	-2.03†	12	1.34‡

Negative scores indicate higher typicality ratings for the introvert target person, positive scores indicate higher typicality ratings for the extravert target person.

\*  $p < 0.001$

†  $p < 0.01$

‡  $p < 0.05$

7 of which were statistically significant (cf. Table 4). The three dependent variables which failed to produce significant differences referred to characteristics listed as numbers 3, 7, and 9 in Table 1.

Only in the case of two variables addressing differences in brain activation (Table 1, Nos 2 and 8), the direction of the difference between group means was contrary to expectation, being significant in one of these cases (No. 2). Being 'a person whose brain functions require little stimulation to be activated' was considered significantly more characteristic of the extravert target person than the introvert. Being 'a person whose brain functions require intensive stimulation to be activated' was considered more characteristic of the introvert.

Of all the dependent measures only these two do not correspond to the research findings on introversion-extraversion which demonstrate a higher threshold of brain activation for extraverts than for introverts. Thus, it appears on the basis of the present results that although the majority of inferences were in accordance with Eysenck's main research findings, there are genotypic characteristics of introverts and extraverts which may not be easily inferred on the basis of phenotypic information.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Jointly, the findings of the two studies suggest that, contrary to what may be regarded as intuitively plausible, lay conceptions of personality contain well-formed propositions linked manifest phenotypic characteristics with latent genotypic propositions. Furthermore, the complimentary nature of the two studies suggests that these propositions allow nearly perfect reversible inferences. Given a genotypic target person description (generated on the basis of a composition of the main experimental findings in the trait-type domain of extraversion-introversion) laypersons discriminate correctly all phenotypic statements belonging to the respective target person categories. *Vice versa*, given phenotypic target person descriptions developed on the basis of the highest factor loading items on the extraversion dimension subjects are able to discriminate



correctly nearly all the *major* and uncontroversial differences between extraverts and introverts obtained in experimental studies collaborating Eysenck's trait-type model. The only exception is the central statement relating to different resting levels of cortical arousal<sup>2</sup>.

These findings suggest that the major propositions particular to both tiers of trait-type models, i.e. genotypic and phenotypic, are available to laypersons. By implication, they question the claim that a genotypic tier furnishes personality models with a special scientific status. Scientific in this connection refers to the aspect of a psychological theory which supersedes lay conceptions. What are the potential implications of the present findings, given that the evidence obtained in the trait-domain of extraversion-introversion does not favour the conclusion that scientific propositions have a privileged status. The validity and reliability of the main and uncontroversial experimental work in the trait-type model pertaining to the extraversion-introversion domain are obviously not put into question by the findings of these two studies. What they do question is the implicit and thus unexamined assumption that laypersons do not have access to so-called higher-order explanations, such as postulated in a genotypic tier. As a consequence of this assumption, the content of lay conceptions is hardly ever explored in its relation to formal psychological theory. This failure to reference the relationship between lay and scientific conceptions may therefore lead to unwarranted conclusions about the scientific status of theoretical statements.

From a social constructivist perspective the implication of this finding is that theory construction in the personality domain should reference its relation to lay conceptions and identify more clearly what the reciprocal relation between person cognition as lay representations and personality theory as a scientific representation of personality is. Such examinations furnish the propositional structure of lay knowledge domains, and the elucidation of these representations is crucial because they must play a central role in the monitoring of social behaviour.

Indeed, there is evidence from other research that the validity of specific hypotheses in the personality domain rely exclusively on the availability (implicit or explicit) of such knowledge in everyday life. For example, Pawlik and Buse (1979) demonstrated that the relationships postulated between astrological signs and personality dimensions (*cf.* Mayo, White and Eysenck, 1978) was only valid for subjects who had common-sense conceptions of this relationship. Similarly, these authors (*cf.* Buse and Pawlik, 1984) demonstrate that postulated relationships between Kretschmer's constitutional properties and personality characteristics are largely a function of these propositional relationships being part and parcel of lay conceptions of personality. For those subjects who did not entertain these propositions the correlations between constitution type and personality were not obtained.

The type of social constructivist approach adopted here highlights not only the dialectical relationship between social constructions of the world and psychological realities. As Berger (1966) points out 'The psychological reality produces the psychological model, insofar as the model is an empirically verifiable representation

<sup>2</sup>In large part, this was due to the difficulty in formulating unambiguously the cortical arousal reference in this item rather than visceral arousal. Indeed, these two items posed difficulties in the piloting of the instruments and were reformulated in consultation with the expert for the two main studies. Post-experimental inquiries suggested that the items were still not optimally worded and that subjects found it difficult comprehending cortical arousal, suggesting strongly that such a statement is indeed not available in 'common-sense' repertoires of personality.

of the reality. Once formed, however, the psychological model can act back upon the psychological reality. The model has *realizing* potency, that is, it can create psychological reality as a 'self-fulfilling prophecy' (p. 114).

There is earlier research showing the inter-penetration of common-sense with 'scientific' conceptions, such as in the case of psychoanalytic theory (cf. Moscovici, 1961). In our view the bi-directionality of the content of social cognition and psychological theorizing has direct implications not only for theory construction in general, but also for the conceptualization of models of social behaviour in particular.

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## RÉSUMÉ

On rend compte des deux études qui examinent la validité des théories scientifiques de la personnalité. Le point de vue socio-constructiviste soutient que les modèles de la personnalité doivent découler et par là-même se référer aux conceptions profanes des individus. Le modèle prototypique des traits d'introversion-extraversion d'Eysenck, qui contient des propositions précises quant aux différences entre extravertis et introvertis sur le plan du phénotype et du génotype, est utilisé comme modèle scientifique de la personnalité; deux études explorent sa validité par rapport aux conceptions profanes sur la personnalité. Dans la première étude, les sujets sont mis en présence d'une personne-cible dont la caractérisation génotypique est soit l'introversion, soit l'extraversion, et on leur demande d'inférer les différences phénotypiques correspondantes. Dans la seconde étude, le processus d'inférence est inversé:

on demande aux sujets d'inférer les caractéristiques génotypiques des introvertis vs. les extravertis sur la base de deux types de descriptions du phénotype de la personne-cible. Les résultats des deux études révèlent une grande justesse des inférences de la part des sujets, ce qui suggère que les individus profanes ont des conceptions bien-fondées de la personnalité basées sur des propositions psychogénétiques d'un "ordre supérieur" issues du modèle prototypique des traits d'Eysenck. Les implications de ces observations sont discutées en vue de l'élaboration d'une théorie.

### ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Es wird über zwei Untersuchungen berichtet, in denen die Verfügbarkeit von wissenschaftlichen Aussagen zur Persönlichkeit in Laienkonzeptionen der Persönlichkeit geprüft wird. Es wird behauptet, daß von einem sozial-konstruktivistischen Standpunkt Modelle der Persönlichkeit aus Laienkonzeptionen über Personen abgeleitet werden und sich darauf beziehen müssen. Eysenck's Eigenschaftsmodell von Intraversion—Extraversion, das spezifische Aussagen über phänotypische und genotypische Unterschiede von Extravertierten und Intravertierten macht, wurde als wissenschaftliches Modell der Persönlichkeit genutzt und seine Verfügbarkeit in Laienkonzeptionen der Persönlichkeit in zwei Untersuchungen geprüft. In der ersten Untersuchung wurde den Vpn eine genotypische Charakterisierung entweder einer extravertierten oder intravertierten Person dargeboten. Sie wurden aufgefordert, entsprechende phänotypische Unterschiede daraus abzuleiten. In der zweiten Untersuchung wurde der Inferenzprozeß umgekehrt, indem die Vpn aufgefordert wurden, genotypische Charakteristika von Intravertierten vs. Extravertierten aus phänotypischen Beschreibungen der beiden Typen herzuleiten. Die Ergebnisse beider Untersuchungen zeigten einen hohen Grad an Genauigkeit in den Schlußfolgerungen der Vpn. Dies legt nahe, daß Laienpersonen eine gut ausgearbeitete Konzeption der Persönlichkeit besitzen, die psychogenetische Aussagen höherer Ordnung entsprechend dem Eigenschaftsmodell von Eysenck einschließt. Die Folgerungen daraus für die Konstruktion von Theorien werden diskutiert.