Further Implications of Personality and Behavioural Control

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Abstract

RST model, which attempts to integrate brain physiology, cognitive psychology and consciousness with personality. Yet, some of the more intriguing possibilities of the model are barely hinted at, such as the implications for the value of self-reports in personality research, or a mechanism that may be able to integrate social influence with psychophysiology. Such extensions, along with exploration of the model's practical consequences, should take us much closer to a genuinely comprehensive understanding of personality.

Personality psychology has long had conflicts between its fundamental theory and evidentiary basis, with the empirical often winning over the conceptual but providing little to replace it. The creative and intriguing ideas of psycho-analytical, philosophical and biological thinkers are usually overwhelmed by empirical brute force of validity coefficients, such as those discussed in the often-misrepresented review by Mischel (1968), or factor analyses, which are useful but clumsy tools for theoretical work (Block, 2001). This has resulted in much of the discussion of the currently dominant lexical models of personality doing little more than extolling the value of describing consistencies in personality variation (Ashton & Lee, 2005), or resorting to unobservable, circularly-defined basic tendencies (McCrae & Costa, 1999). So, researchers like me, who typically use lexical personality models, find it easy to be at least a little envious of the theoretical structure that continues to develop around Gray's (Gray, 1981) Reinforcement Sensitivity Theory (RST). It was in this frame that I approached Philip Corr's extension of RST.

This extended RST model reflects an attempt to integrate broader ideas associated with reflective processing, conscious awareness and behavioural control, largely based on findings from neurocognitive research. Any attempt at explaining both personality and consciousness may seem hubristic, especially given the comments in the previous paragraph, but in several areas the argument is, if anything, not bold enough. This applies particularly to the limitations on self-awareness inherent in the proposed model and to the consideration of the model's implications for a broader understanding of personality.

One of the premises derived from the neurocognitive research upon which Corr's model is based is that our sense of conscious initiation of actions is illusory because conscious awareness comes after a decision to act, not before. It appears that awareness of act initiation is just like any other process of perception, in that it takes time to consciously perceive an event even if the event (i.e., act initiation) is internal to the observer's brain.

This premise formed much of the basis for discussing the respective functions involved in behavioural control from an RST perspective. However, the lack of awareness of processes prior to initiating action also has implications for personality measurement. Specifically, it means that when asking people to report on their propensities to act, we are asking them to observe their behaviour in a manner not too dissimilar from the manner in which people observe the behaviour of others. So, even when rating myself, I (the observer) am effectively rating me (the actor) as if I was an *other*-rater. As Corr also noted, people may also be unaware of their wants or emotions, further limiting the ability of self-raters to assess their own personality, especially the underlying processes that lead to behaviour.

Thus, Corr's integration implies that personality measurement by self-assessment will be less than veridical, and theories of personality psychology focused on "outputs of controlled processing available to conscious introspection (e.g., self concepts)" (p.8) should be considered cautiously. Instead, this model adds strength to recent calls for greater emphasis on behavioural observation in psychology generally, and personality and social psychology specifically (Baumeister, Vohs, & Funder, 2007; Furr, 2009).

Despite this, consciousness remains crucial in Corr's model, through its role in suppressing inappropriately active impulses before they are expressed, and strengthening processes likely to be appropriate in the future. This raises yet another overlooked opportunity, namely integrating social influences with conscious processing. Even though social influence on behaviour is beyond argument, it is elided from many accounts of personality (Fleeson & Noftle, 2009), with individuals treated as closed systems. This betrays an implicit guiding assumption that individual behavioural consistencies are largely if not entirely the

consequence of intra-individual phenomena. Yet humans are inherently social organisms, ones that rely on social interaction generally and linguistic interaction more uniquely for behavioural guidance. For example, it is an everyday experience for people to change their behaviour in response to a comment, such as a friend saying, "Try doing this" or, "I wouldn't do that". The role of social interaction was not the focus of the article, but there is nonetheless a hint of a mechanism by which this can be readily incorporated. Specifically, in what was little more than a side comment when discussing his model's implications, Corr suggested that linguistic interaction (specifically, 'talk therapy') may affect the proposed personality systems and consequent behaviours by verbally engaging conscious, off-line processing. Further examination of the manner in which social and especially linguistic interactions affect behavioural controls would add greatly to the value of this model by broadening its theoretical range and generalisability.

A final suggestion for this model is to consider further its practical implications. Personality is inherently an applied science because all humans are in the business of recognising and getting the best out of the personalities of ourselves and those around us. As inadequate as it may be in many regards, one of the pleasures of the Freudian approach to personality processes is that it allows the cognoscenti to recognise patterns of behaviour that correspond to psychoanalytic processes, enhancing one's sense of awareness. Being able to recognise projection, denial and splitting serve practical purposes as well, not only in counselling and therapy but also in organisational development (e.g., de Vries, 1991). Even the theoretically-impoverished lexical models of personality are easier to discuss and apply than concepts like BIS. Integrating RST with consciousness and behavioural control theory is one thing, but it will lack something until people are able to easily apply it to everyday inter- and intrapersonal issues.

Of course, there are many missing links in as ambitious a model as this —the manner by which the various components of the model interact, how the 'cybernetic weights' are constructed and applied, the relationship to brain and somatic physiology are just some that spring to mind — but there is already much that has been addressed. The biggest challenge, however, is still to come: where do the lexical factors fit into the picture?

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