9
Commonsense Theories of Personality

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Höchstes Glück der Erdenkinder
Sei nur die Persönlichkeit. (Goethe)
(The highest happiness of earth’s children
is nothing but personality.)

Magis quis vereris quam quo interest. (Seneca)
(Personality is more important than surroundings.)

Although the lay person and the psychologist use the term personality somewhat differently, there exists a rich literature in fiction and journalism as well as scientific writing speculating on the nature of personality and individual differences. This chapter will attempt to examine lay theories of personality and contrast them with ‘scientific’ theories. First, however, the issue of common sense will be considered with respect to individual differences. Secondly, the differences between implicit, indigenous, everyday lay theories will be contrasted with explicit, universal, specialist scientific theories. Thirdly, the literature on lay understanding of individual differences will be considered by looking at different methods to elicit or uncover these ‘theories of personality’ as well as findings from a variety of experiments.

Common Sense

To what extent are psychologists’ theories of personality any different from laymen’s? Are they more than commonsense study dressed up in impenetrable and obfuscat ing jargon? Surely people would not be able to understand each other and predict each other’s behaviour if they did not have a pragmatic but basically commonsensical theory of personality?

To many laymen, the personality theories they come across in a number of the social sciences – psychology, management, sociology, criminology – are simply common sense. Theories of findings seem already well known, and hence expensive research is thought to be a trivial, time-wasting and pointless exercise describing or proving what we already know. Being sensitive to this criticism, social scientists often warn readers of the dangers of common sense which lulls people into the false security that they understand others, and some have even provocatively mentioned the term ‘uncommon sense’ in their papers and titles (Gammmack, 1982).

For instance, McKeachie and Doyle (1966) begin their general psychology textbook by quoting anonymous proverbs, some of which refer to individual differences such as ‘You are never too old to learn’ versus ‘You can’t teach an old dog new tricks.’ It is argued that common sense cannot tell us under which conditions each generalization is true – for that, scientific research is required (Fletcher, 1984). Others have attempted to persuade readers that common knowledge provides only inconsistent and misleading suggestions for understanding social behaviour by giving a short test. Baron and Byrne (1981), in their popular textbook on social psychology, ask the various questions each of which has a true-false response format. These include: ‘In general, women conform more than men’; ‘If you pay someone for doing something they enjoy, they will come to like this task even more’; ‘In choosing their romantic partners, most people show a strong preference for extremely attractive persons’; ‘If you want to get someone to change his or her views, it is best to offer this person a very large reward for doing so’; ‘Most people feel sympathy for the victims of serious accidents or natural disasters and do not hold such persons responsible for the harm they have suffered.’

Readers are assured that research findings suggest that all these statements are false. Similarly, in a book on Organizational Behaviour, Baron (1983) offers a similar quiz where again all the answers are false. These include: ‘Directive, authoritative leaders are generally best in attaining high levels of productivity from their subordinates’; ‘In most cases, individuals act in ways that are consistent with their attitudes about various issues’; ‘Top executives are usually extremely competitive, hard-driving types’; ‘Most persons are much more concerned with the size of their own salary than with the salary of others’; ‘Direct, face-to-face communication usually enhances co-operation between individuals’; ‘Most persons prefer challenging jobs with a great deal of freedom and autonomy.’

These quizzes are all attempts to fend off the lay objection that psychology, particularly social and occupational psychology, is nothing but common sense. Interestingly textbooks on personality theory, of which there are many, rarely do this, simply ignoring the issue of common sense.

Furnham (1983a) has suggested that the commonsense objection to social science in general or personality theory in particular
normally takes three forms. The first is that the findings are well known, intuitive, unsurprising, uninformative, and hence common sense and science are no different. The second is partly the overuse—
that is, disciplines which investigate issues which are the stuff of personal experience (personality differences, love and attraction) have tended either by use of excessive jargon or technical language, or the focusing on minute, esoteric, trivial or irrelevant aspects of social behaviour, to debase or corrupt common sense. That is, topics that are amenable to common sense should have explanations in terms of commonsense language and concepts, not jargon. The third, related objection occurs when experimental findings or social-science writings appear to contradict widely held views of human nature. Many studies have demonstrated that people are cruel, unsightful, self-centred, compliant, anti-social, and hence these studies have raised more of an objection than those that have painted the opposite picture (Milgram, 1974; Zimbardo et al., 1973). That is, where findings are against the consensus or commonsense belief that people are basically good, altruistic, intelligent and so on, objections are made.

Stroebe (1980) has argued that many social-psychological theories are intuitive and therefore not easily abandoned in the face of contradictory evidence. He mentions the complementary-needs hypothesis, which has not been replicated or supported in over two dozen attempts to test it. ‘Despite this devastating record, the theory is still presented in most attraction and social psychology textbooks. It just makes too much sense that, for example, somebody who loves to push people around should get along better with a spouse who prefers being pushed than pushing’ (1980: 186). Perhaps this observation is even more true of personality theory. Many textbooks reproduce again and again theories of personality that have received almost no empirical support, indeed the opposite, yet appear not to ‘die’. For instance Maslow’s ‘theory’ of hierarchical needs is known by nearly everyone who has had barely one lecture in psychology, yet empirical studies have shown it to be at best a poor simplification of human behaviour.

The objection from ‘common sense’ takes various forms, yet not all academics see this as a problem. Paradoxically, it is the ‘hard’ scientists who are most convinced that all science is just common sense. Julian Huxley, the Nobel Prize-winning scientist, noted in an essay: ‘Science is nothing but trained and organized Common Sense, differing from the latter only as a veteran may differ from a raw recruit: and its methods differ from those of Common Sense only as far as the guardsman’s cut and thrust differ from the manner in which a savage wields his club’. Whitehead is reputed to have said that ‘Science is rooted in the whole apparatus of Common Sense thought.’ This idea of organized, disambiguated common sense is also supported by Rock, who has suggested that all the different academic theories of crime and delinquency are to be found in commonsense formulations:

Common Sense can neither be wholly incorporated nor wholly abandoned. Rather it is typically subjected to a double form of exploitation. . . . Ideas of anomie, differential association, relative deprivation, functional interdependence, conflict, and labelling theory may all be found in folk wisdom, early tracts, and conventional explanation.

They represent parts of the common stock of everyday analysis. It is only the tendency of criminological discourse to become independent that renders such formulations academically novel and remarkable. They have to be restructured before they become available to criminology enquiry. Restructuring may resolve contradictions, unearth implications and refine arguments. But it also sets up a barrier to participation in the larger conversation of ideas. The criminologist is at once unusually sophisticated and unusually simple. (1979: 78)

Others have seen the commonsensical nature of scientific theories, particularly in the social sciences, as inevitable because of the ‘trickle-down’ phenomena. That is, many commonsensical ideas and theories started out as scientific hypotheses but have become familiar as the findings of studies have been ‘popularized’. The Type A literature on heart attacks and personality may be seen as an example of this. Thus, as Brickman pointed out, because social science returns its findings to the general culture, they are apt to become more familiar and commonsensical over time.

A finding in social psychology cannot remain non obvious as people hear it again and again any more than a joke can remain funny to people who hear it again and again. More generally, we may propose that discoveries emerge from a region in which we disbelieve them into a zone in which we find them interesting, and then a zone in which we find them obvious, and eventually perhaps, into a further region in which we are again oblivious to them. (1980: 12)

However, the view of the social scientist as an originator, taxonomist or disambiguator of common sense cannot explain how counter-intuitive theories or ideas occur (Peters, 1960). As Gergen has noted: ‘This presents us with a special paradox: if one’s understanding inevitably depends on existing interpretive modes, how can one engender interpretation that is alien to the existing modes. If “Common Sense” is employed as the instrument of understanding, how can one absorb an argument that violates “Common Sense”? (1980: 263).

Furthermore, this position does not explain the very different theoretical and methodological differences between social scientists.
That is, if social science is simply common sense, why do we find so much disagreement among social scientists? Of course, one might reply that the very contradictory nature of psychological theories proves that they are simply common sense because common sense is itself contradictory. Furthermore, it is not clear why some 'scientific' findings become common sense and others do not; nor why some commonsensical theories are completely misguided and incorrect, have no foundation in actual behaviour, yet do not disappear.

Yet some scientists have dismissed common sense as a source of ideas, let alone of testable theories. Skinner wrote: 'What, after all, have we to show for non-scientific or prescientific good judgement, common sense or the insights gained through personal experience? It is science or nothing' (1972: 160). Similarly, Broadbent (1961), Cattell (1965) and others have talked about pre-scientific or moralistic thinking which is to be ignored as wrong, unable to be proven and so on. Eysenck in his celebrated book Sense and Nonsense in Psychology states:

This is only one example of what appears to be an almost universal belief to the effect that anyone is competent to discuss psychological problems, whether he has taken the trouble to study the subject or not and that while everybody's opinion is of equal value, that of the professional psychologist must be excluded at all costs because he might spoil the fun by producing some facts which would completely upset the speculation and the wonderful dream castles so laboriously constructed by the layman. (1957: 13)

Thus for these eminent psychologists, common sense is a dangerous area from which to draw ideas as they are often misguided or untestable. Even worse, various 'commonsensical' ideas may be based not on simple surmise but on prejudice and political ideology. Moreover one can cite extensive literature that illustrates 'faulty' reasoning: for example, the repeatedly observed failure of lay people to make appropriate use of negative information in problem-solving, and the overwhelming preference for confirmatory strategies in logical reasoning tasks. Finally, as scientific findings trickle down into common sense they get distorted, simplified and corrupted so that they become fundamentally wrong or misleading. A good example of this is lay understanding of handedness and hemispherical differences. Another objection to common sense is that often commonsense notions are unclear, ambiguous, inconsistent and occasionally contradictory. For instance, many proverbs are anonymous. Of course, it could be pointed out that both supposedly contradictory sayings may in fact be compatible, when they are made specific for certain circumstances. Thus it might be that one is 'never too old to learn' certain verbal tasks; however, when it comes to reaction-time skills, 'you can't teach an old dog new tricks'. Similarly, 'out of sight, out of mind' may apply to an acquaintance or distant relative but 'absence makes the heart grow fonder' to a lover or close friend (Furnham, 1987). However, the standard argument advanced is that of McKeachie and Doyle, namely: 'A major weakness of all these pre-scientific modes of explanation – superstition, Common Sense, and intuitive philosophy – is that contradictory predictions and explanations are offered without any means of resolving the differences' (1966: 3).

This discussion begs the question what constitutes common sense, particularly with reference to personality. Indeed it is not sure what the term (common sense) actually refers to (Schwieso, 1984). Although Descartes said that common sense is the best-distributed commodity in the world, because everyone is convinced that they are well supplied with it, it remains quite unclear what it is. Different writers have described it differently: 'the layman's conviction' (Köhler, 1947), 'good sense' (Ryle, 1949), 'intuitive philosophy' (McKeachie and Doyle, 1966), 'prescientific good judgement' (Skinner, 1972). Schwieso (1984) has examined four terms: common sensation, ordinary intelligence, good sense and common opinion, which he argues have subtle different meanings but still offer no clear working definition of common sense. Fletcher (1984) has suggested that three aspects of common sense need to be delineated:

1. Common sense as a set of shared fundamental assumptions about the nature of the social and physical world. These assumptions are thought to be culturally held unanimously; never questioned, justified or even articulated; and the very stuff of philosophy. Examples are, according to Fletcher, that the world exists independently of our perception of it; that other people possess states of conscious awareness, that we are the same person from day to day.

2. Common sense as a set of cultural maxims and shared beliefs about the social and physical world. These assumptions, in the form of proverbs, allegories and fables, are highly invariant across and within cultures as regards whether they are known or believed. Examples include that severe punishment deters criminals, that the unemployed are lazy and that our country needs a powerful army to survive.

3. Common sense as a shared way of thinking about the social and physical world. These are tacitly known mental processes involved in explaining, interpreting and understanding the behaviour of self and others. Essentially this concerns all aspects
of lay social cognition and the ways in which people process information about their world.

But social scientists, originally so dismissive of commonsense beliefs, accounts and explanations primarily on grounds of ambiguity, unfalsifiability and inferential errors, are beginning to examine them in detail. Whereas psychologists seem particularly interested in the process of lay people explaining everyday events, sociologists seem more interested in the content of lay theories. Further, philosophers have subjected social-science theories to tests of whether they are common sense or not, and found that at heart many of them are perfectly understood by the lay person.

Perhaps the greatest advantage of this current interest in common sense (or its many synonyms – lay epistemology, everyday accounts) is that it has encouraged social scientists to elucidate and systematize their theories and do more pre-empirical, logical analysis. In one sense the realization that people are prone to numerous logical and inferential errors has encouraged social scientists to inspect their own theories for the same errors. This is particularly the case because, of late, psychology has become more concerned not with behaviour itself but rather with the accounts of behaviour (Shotter and Burton, 1983).

Lay versus Scientific Theories

Though they do not always acknowledge it, many social scientists have explicit axioms about social behaviour. Economists devise sophisticated models of the economy based upon axiomatic beliefs about lay people's purchasing, saving, investing, gambling and so on. Similarly, health educators construct posters, pamphlets and other material based on what they think lay people believe about their health and the behaviours they exact to ensure it. Politicians occasionally commission surveys and consultants to help present themselves in accordance with the beliefs and expectations of prospective voters.

Furnham (1986b. 1988a. b, c) has suggested that commonsense theories differ from scientific theories on a number of specific dimensions spelt out in Table 9.1. Furnham (1988b) has admitted that this is a somewhat simplified picture and could even be misleading. Thus not all lay theories are implicit, inconsistent, content-oriented and so on, nor are 'scientific' theories always process-oriented, falsifiable and so on. Table 9.1 perhaps presents rather too much on four-legs good (science) versus two-legs bad (lay) simplification, yet it does highlight some of the more important criteria upon which one might evaluate a personality theory.

Valentine (1982) has listed eight criteria: scope, parsimony, clarity, logical consistency, precision, testability, empirical support and fruitfulness. Not everyone would agree that they are the best or most relevant criteria, and there would probably be little agreement as to the rank order of those criteria. Furthermore, whereas some observers may agree with any criterion, they may not agree with its implied other policy. Thus to take Valentine's first criterion of scope, she notes: 'Both breadth and completeness of coverage may be considered advantageous' (1982: 96), which suggests that some might argue that the greater the scope of the theory (in the style of grand theories) the better, while others would reasonably argue the opposite. This is not to suggest that there is no agreement as to the criteria by which one may judge theories but rather to note that agreement about them is far from perfect.

Furnham (1988a) did however spell out some of the more interesting and important questions that one would ask of any lay (or scientific) theory of personality.

1 What is the etiology or development of the individual differences observed? For instance, what part does heredity versus environment play in the origin of stable individual differences?

2 What is the relationship between different aspects, features or dimensions of personality? For instance, if one comes up with a taxonomy or typology, one would want to know how one type (extraverts, endomorphs, aquarians) are related to or correlated with other types (introverts, mesomorphs, librans).

3 How do these individual differences or personality factors function? That is, what is the process, mechanism or biology that
determines how individual differences occur? Related to this is the question of the function of holding any particular theory by any one individual.

4 Are individual differences and personality features stable across time and consistent over situations? This question, widely debated in academic circles, is of course crucial to the definition of personality.

5 What are the consequences of being one type/having a trait? That is, what are the characteristics of people with different personalities – what are their strengths and weaknesses?

6 How can one change one’s or another person’s personality? For instance, can one change personality and, if so, how?

7 How does one particular theory of personality relate to another? That is, what is the overlap between various concepts? For instance, it has been suggested that Eysenck’s concept of extraversion, Zuckerman’s of sensation-seeking, Mehrabian’s of stimulus-screening, Strelau’s of temperament and Rosenman’s of A-type are all closely linked. To what extent are lay theories essentially the same but using different terms?

8 How useful are the language, analogies and models of the theory? Nearly all theories use analogies to explain or describe phenomena and some of these are more or less useful.

Clearly there are dangers in attempting to compare and contrast lay and scientific theories, but what is most useful is to have a set of agreed dimensions or questions to evaluate any lay theory of personality.

Lay Understanding of Individual Differences

The use of the term ‘personality’ by the lay person (she has no personality; he has a strong personality) is very different from that of the academic psychologist who uses it in a technical sense. This does not suggest, however, that there is an agreed definition of personality. Furthermore, there are numerous, very different theories of personality in academic psychology. Reviewers and propagandists of these theories appear to fall into three groups; benevolent eclectics, partisan zealots and taxonomic enthusiasts (Furnham, 1988b).

Benevolent eclectics list and describe the theories of the most famous personality theorists: Adler, Cattell, Eysenck, Freud and so on. Although limitations of each theorist are mentioned, they are usually impartially described with no good-bad, correct-incorrect, valid-invalid judgement made. For instance Hall and Lindzey (1957) in their celebrated textbook compared seventeen personality theorists on eighteen dimensions, including unconscious determinants, organicism emphasis and multiplicity of motives. Similarly Phares (1984), who reviews personality theorists from various approaches, argues that they can be compared on six dimensions: systematic versus unsystematic; operational versus non-operational; content versus process; experience versus heredity; generality versus specificity and internal versus situational. A major problem with this approach is that there is no explicit criterion for inclusion or exclusion of any theory or theorists, perhaps because there is no agreed paradigm in personality research (Eysenck, 1983).

Partisan zealots tend to ignore all theories except a chosen one, thereby opposing, denying or invalidating all theories except the one. Thus Cattell (1965) rejects psychoanalytic and phenomenological theories of personality, arguing for multivariate experimental methods to define and measure underlying traits. Similarly, followers of Kelly’s (1955) personal-construct theory frequently choose to ignore all other theories of personality in favour of their chosen approach. The main danger of this zealous defence of one theory is the potential blindness to contradictory evidence that may result. On the other hand, it could be argued that there is only one correct description of personality and that is worth pursuing.

Taxonomic enthusiasts attempt to classify all personality theories into groups or categories. This may be done historically in terms of schools, empirically in terms of methods or epistemologically in terms of the sort of data admitted in support of theory. Although there are numerous and dramatic differences between the resultant taxonomies of reviewers there does tend to be agreement. For instance, Cook (1984) describes four types of personality theory: those on the surface (the description of traits and factors) and those below the surface (biological, phenomenal and motivation).

Of course one could split each one of these approaches (schools, lines) into further groups. Thus trait theorists may be split into single-trait theorists who emphasize just one major dimension (such as field independence–dependence, A/B type behaviour patterns, locus of control) or those who favour multi-trait theories (Cattell has sixteen, Eysenck three).

These three approaches, however, share a number of assumptions. Yet as Hampson (1982) has pointed out there are three quite different possible perspectives on personality: the personality theorists perspective, which involves studying other people and deriving coherent theories about personality types or traits; the lay perspective, which concerns everyday theories about other people derived from experience, general knowledge, language and so on.
that are not 'scientific' or explicit; and the self perspective, which concerns our knowledge of and theories about ourselves. Personality theorists have the first and third (academic and self-theories); lay people, be they trained scientists or not, have only the second and third (lay and self-theories).

The lay perspective has been investigated extensively by psychologists, who have usually referred to it as implicit personality theory. For instance the boxer, Mohammed Ali has made explicit his theory of personality, which is based on fruit. The theory depends on the hardness/softness of the inside and outside of fruit. This allows for the four types of fruit shown in Figure 9.1. The boxer confessed to being a Grape (in his view the most desirable of the various fruit), though usually letting the public see only his Walnut personality.

Lay theories of personality are to be seen in various contexts but perhaps are best observed at work. Managers frequently hold strong beliefs about individual differences and as a result many 'theories' in occupational psychology reflect this bias. McGregor (1960) has argued that managers have two basic theories (called X and Y) about the personality of their employees which leads them to exercise light levels of control (if a follower of theory X and less if a follower of theory Y). In essence, theory X assumes that human beings inherently dislike work and will, if possible, avoid it; most people must be controlled and threatened with punishment if they are to work towards organizational goals; the average person actually wants to be directed, thereby avoiding responsibility.

Security is more desirable than achievement. Theory Y proceeds from a different set of assumptions. These are: work is recognized by people as a natural activity; human beings need not be controlled and threatened. They will exercise self-control and self-direction in the pursuit of organizational goals to which they are committed; commitment is associated with rewards for achievement; people learn, under the right conditions, to seek as well as accept responsibility; many people in society have creative potential, not just a few gifted individuals; under most organizational conditions the intellectual potential of people is only partially utilized.

The plethora and diversification of these idiosyncratic lay theories have led cynics to argue that there are basically two types of people in this world – those who believe that there are two types and those who do not!

**The Measurement, Assessment or Investigation of Lay Theories**

The social sciences offer a plethora of methodologies for studying social behaviour, each with its own distinct advantages and disadvantages. But which method is best at eliciting the subtle and fragile lay theories of personality? To what extent does the method dictate the kind of results obtained?

Essentially three types of methodologies may profitably be used to investigate lay theories of human behaviour: those based on self-report; those derived from test data; and those actually concerned with observing behaviour. These methodologies are by no means mutually exclusive but each has its strength and weaknesses.

**Self-Report**

An obvious way to 'get at' lay theories of behaviour is through listening to or recording the answers to specific questions. This may be done through questionnaires and surveys as well as interviews. Each may differ according to the amount, type and quality of information available, though of course one may use more than one methodology at the same time. Therefore, as Furnham (1983b) and Forgas et al. (1982) did, one can simply ask, 'What causes people to become rich?' and do a content analysis on these answers, which may or may not reflect the scope and subtlety on lay theories. However, these open-ended questions provide useful examples of statements or explanations which may be given to other groups in the form of a questionnaire.

The use of questionnaires with either open-ended or closed questions has obvious advantages and disadvantages. Some of those have been psychometrically assessed and may be useful for investigating general lay beliefs about human nature (Furnham et al., 1985). Questionnaire measures have been constantly criticized, for four major reasons. The first is the problem of response sets – faking good or bad, acquiescing with the perceived demands of the researcher and so on. Though this is a frequent objection aimed particularly at personality inventories, it may well be far less relevant when investigating lay theories. However, it is the extent to
which response sets threaten the validity of self-report measures which has been challenged by Furnham (1986a). The second objection is the limitation of self-report data in that people may tell more than they know (Nisbett and Wilson, 1977) or simply be unable to report on certain features such as their needs or motives. Once again it is not always clear to what extent this objection applies to studies on lay theories, except perhaps as regards the cognitive processes involved in their maintenance. Thirdly, there are inevitable sampling problems when using self-report measures such as questionnaires (but not interviews), which are by definition limited to the literate. Indeed interviews are also biased to the articulate. Thus better-educated, higher socio-economic classes may be over-researched while illiterate or marginally articulate people are neglected. It may well be that the latter group holds qualitatively as well as quantitatively different theories that do not get sufficiently researched. Finally, there is always the problem in standard questionnaires of imposing the researcher's own cognitive constructs on to the respondents, rather than allowing them to reveal the range and content of their own constructs. This is a well-known objection, favoured by followers of Kelly (1955) and his personal-construct theory. Once again this is probably no less true of studies in lay theories where open-ended questions are frequently used, in which subjects may respond entirely in their own words.

Interviews and questionnaires have been used fairly extensively to investigate lay theories in economics, education, medicine and psychology (Furnham, 1988b).

Test Data
A number of different types of tests may be used to attempt to ascertain lay theories or knowledge. For instance, studies on schema formation or recall may be profitably used. Many studies have supported the selective-recall hypothesis, which suggests that people remember information better than is congruent with their attitudes, because the attitudes or beliefs act as a type of organizing framework which tends to promote the encoding and retrieval of attitude-support material. This has been demonstrated with religious, political and sexual stimulus material, though not all attempts have supported the hypotheses (Furnham and Singh, 1987). Thus by giving lay people material to process (read, watch, listen to and so on) and then asking them to recall as much as they can of it, various organizing schema may become apparent which may shape their lay theories.

A second test method involves asking people deliberately to dissimilate in tests (that is, not necessarily give the correct or preferred answers but the one they expect a particular type of person to give). For instance if a person is asked to respond to a test as he or she believes an accountant might, and his or her resultant profile is that of an obsessive, boring, non-spontaneous person, one may argue that this is the stereotype the respondent has about accountants. Similarly if asked to fake good respondents' answers subjects produce a healthy, adjusted, intelligent and so on profile. One may therefore argue that they have understood the underlying dimension investigated by the researcher (Furnham, 1986a; McCarthy and Furnham, 1986). Similarly if a person can predict his or her score accurately on a test (of personality, ability, skill and so on) one may conclude that he or she are familiar with the concept being tested.

Thus if you asked non-alcoholics to 'pretend to be alcoholics' and then interviewed them regarding their drinking habits and motives as well as other features of their social behaviour, one might elicit the full subtlety and complexity of their beliefs and theories about alcoholism. Furthermore if they were required to predict their score on some alcoholism-related test, this too may yield interesting insights into their theories of the manifestations of alcoholism.

There are numerous other ways in which test data might be used to investigate lay theories. These include using selective attention tests as measures of pre-conscious processing. A method which appears to be both attracting more attention and highly relevant in this field is the development of prototypes. Essentially these are metacognitive tasks.

Observing Behaviour
Because of the problems associated with self-report, some researchers have preferred to observe behaviour and infer attitudes, beliefs and theories from it. Thus if a person is known to be attempting to lose weight and substantially reduces his or her intake of carbohydrates, one may infer that he or she believes carbohydrates are fattening. However, one cannot know much more than this, which itself may not be informative. For instance, one cannot know whether the person believes carbohydrates are more or less fattening than proteins or animal fats; indeed one cannot even know whether the person knows what carbohydrates are and is just following instructions from a book on what to or not to stop eating. Simple observation of behaviour may not be very useful at all in researching lay theories for human behaviour, particularly as the relationship between attitudes and behaviour are well known to be weak and mediated by many other factors.

Participant observation on the other hand may be much more
useful as one can observe contextual and social determinants of behaviour over time, which may lead to many more clues as to the nature of lay theories. However, as participant observation nearly always involves direct interaction between researcher and respondent, it could be seen to share all the advantages and disadvantages of the self-report methods.

**Lay Theories of Extraversion and Neuroticism**

Despite the plethora of academic, 'scientific' theories of personality, each with its own terminology, basic dimensions and unique processes, certain dimensions appear to recur in a number of theories. Eysenck (1983) has argued persuasively for there actually being a paradigm in personality research which, naturally, encompasses his three-factor theory. Two of the three basic dimensions underlying personality, according to Eysenck's system, are extraversion and neuroticism; dimensions one can find in many other writers, including Galen and Jung (Eysenck, 1981). Both terms are used frequently in lay language. Hence they provide useful dimensions to compare and contrast lay and academic theories.

**Extraversion**

The term, or at least the concept of, extraversion has a very long and distinguished history in scientific thinking. Eysenck (1981) traced it through the work of Galen the Greek physician, Immanuel Kant the German philosopher, Wundt the German scientist, Gross the Viennese physician, Heymans the Dutch psychologist, Jung the psychoanalyst, Kretschmer the physician, Spearman and Guilford the statisticians, Teplov the Russian physician, Cattell the psychologist and finally Eysenck himself. As one may imagine, therefore, it is a term widely used and understood by expert and layman alike. Indeed it appears to be a personality description frequently used by lay people in describing others.

Comparatively recently there have been a number of studies that have attempted to investigate lay theories of extraversion. However, the work of Semin and Furnham has been programmatic in the sense that they have done a series of studies (with colleagues) examining lay conceptions of personality.

In a series of studies, Semin has examined what he has called commonsense or everyday conceptions of personality, specifically extraversion. Semin, Rosch and Chassein (1981) were interested in the overlap between naive subjects, compared to psychologists' descriptions of extraversion. The method they employed involved constructing a twenty-four item (twelve for extravert, twelve for introvert) lay scale of extraversion from descriptive statements commonly offered by two lay samples and administering it along with the Eysenck Personality Inventory (Eysenck and Eysenck, 1975) to another sample. The scales correlated at $r = 0.51$, $p < 0.001 (N = 33)$, which was taken as evidence of good convergent validity. The authors agreed that 'it can be maintained that the everyday usage of person descriptions relevant to the categories extraversion–introversion allows individuals to communicate, with relatively high degrees of accuracy, differential information about perceived behavioural indication of others and self' (1981: 82).

In two further rather different studies, Semin and Chassein (1985) argued that hypothetico-deductive models of personality rely primarily on ordinary-language descriptions of persons and do not constitute higher-order models. In the first study subjects Q-sorted the thirty-one trait labels taken from the famous 'Eysenckogram' describing the few quadrants separated by the two factors. As predicted, the subjects' classification was not unlike that of the formal model, so demonstrating again the conceptual overlap between higher-order representations of personality and everyday social representation. A second study concentrated on individual and cultural variations in lay subjects pair-comparing the thirty-five traits used earlier. As predicted there was very high conceptual overlap between subjects' trait-comparison, once again supporting the original theory.

More recently Semin and Krahé (1987) have done two studies which required students who were presented with genotypic (or phenotypic) characterizations of either extravert or introvert to infer corresponding phenotypic (or genotypic) processes. Both studies provided evidence to support the contention that lay conceptions of personality contain genotypic and phenotypic propositions about extraversion which allow correct inferences back and forth.

From the various studies, Semin has concluded that there is very little difference between lay and scientific theories of extraversion. Furnham has reached the same conclusion, but through a rather different set of studies. In a series of studies – Furnham and Henderson, 1983; Furnham and Varian, 1988 – the ability of subjects to predict their own extraversion score has been examined. Furnham and Henderson found a correlation of $r = 0.31 (N = 63)$ ($p < 0.01$) between estimated score and actual score (derived from the Eysenck and Eysenck, 1975, EPQ), while Furnham and Varian (1988) found a correlation of $r = 0.68 (N = 159, p < 0.001$. These results are in accordance with others in the field and are not dissimilar from those of Semin mentioned above.
However, a number of important caveats need to be mentioned with regard to the interpretation of these findings. First, although correlations between estimated and test-derived scores are significantly positive, they account for well under half the variance. Secondly, the above studies showed that subjects were less accurate at predicting other personality dimensions such as neuroticism and psychoticism than they were at predicting extraversion, though there is no obvious reason for this. Thirdly, people are considerably less successful at predicting the scores of others compared to themselves.

More importantly Furnham and Henderson have suggested:

Instead of arguing that people's own personality estimations do/do not accurately reflect the assessment of psychological instruments, it may be just as meaningful to argue it the other way around, concluding that it is the assessment devices of psychologists that do not seem to be able to judge any more accurately. It is possible that only bias and the self-preserving interest of psychologists cause them to continue to call their judgments 'true' and 'accurate' and the judgments of those they study as 'mistaken' and 'inaccurate' or 'false'. Thus, this study may be more accurately described as a comparison of two types of personality assessment - a formal test versus an intuitive judgment. Indeed, it may well be that it is the professional psychologist who has the beam in his/her own eye while continually exposing the mote that is in his/her brother subject's eye. (1983: 38)

A second source of information on lay theories of extraversion comes from studies on dissimulating or faking. It could be argued that if lay people can fake a positive, desirable profile, they understand the concept or dimension that the psychologist is attempting to measure and, furthermore, they understand which is the most or least socially desirable score. A plethora of studies looking at faking on the EPQ have shown that people who fake good have inflated extraversion scores but deflated neuroticism scores. Furnham and Henderson (1982) found substantial differences in the extraversion score (range 0-23) between four groups: controls who responded honestly ($X = 12.00$); a group who faked good ($X = 16.15$); a group who faked bad ($X = 5.90$) and a group who faked mad ($X = 10.01$). In other words, subjects asked to present themselves in a favourable light were much more likely to present themselves as extraverts because extraversion is considered much more socially desirable than introversion.

Further evidence for this comes from a study looking at successful and non-successful applicants to the police force. Burbeck and Furnham (1985) found that successful candidates were more extraverted (and less neurotic) than non-successful candidates, but that, comparing applicants' scores with norms, all candidates 'faked good', displaying unusually high extraversion scores.

Thus these studies on extraversion have shown that subjects can describe, predict, recognize and fake extraversion traits and scores with fairly considerable accuracy. This suggests that when lay people and experts use the term extraversion they are doing so similarly. However, that is not to say that subjects recognize or subscribe to academic theories (such as arousal theory) for the origin of these differences!

**Neuroticism**

Though the term neuroticism is most often used pejoratively, some people have suggested that there can be benefits in being neurotic. For instance Proust is said to have remarked: 'Everything great in the world is done by neurotics, they alone founded our religions and created our masterpieces.' The idea that unhappiness and/or neurosis is related to artistic creativity is relatively widespread among lay people but has little or no empirical support.

Etymologically the term means 'weakness of the nerves' and is derived from the Greek word for nerves. In fact, until the nineteenth century all forms of mental illness were included in the class neurotica, so much that the diagnosis was abandoned as too general until the end of the nineteenth century (Kisker, 1964).

Beard (1880) introduced the term neurasthenia, whose symptoms included lack of energy, fatigue, physical complaints and general disability. Kraepelin (1915), however, distinguished between neurasthenia, psychasthenia and hysteria, which remained the basis for the description of the neurotic conditions from the 1890s until the appearance of the American Psychiatric Association's publication of their *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* in 1952. However, the latest edition (1980) has no reference to neurosis at all.

Most textbooks have difficulty in arriving at a clear definition of neuroticism, though most are agreed on categorizing neurotic symptoms into various groups - anxiety, phobic, obsessive-compulsive, conversion, dissociative and depressing reactions (Buss, 1966; Kisker, 1964). Although he admits a number of ambiguities in the concept of neurosis, Eysenck offered a simple definition for his lay readers: 'Neurosis is a term we often use for behaviour which is associated with strong emotion, which is maladaptive, and which the person giving rise to it realises is nonsensical, absurd or irrelevant, but which he is powerless to change' (1978: 15).

Similarly, in their *EPQ Manual*, Eysenck and Eysenck define a typical neurotic as
looked at normal people's ability to predict their score derived from the Eysenck (EPI or EPQ) measures. Correlations have been modest, positive and significant between the subject's estimate and the actual score: Harrison and McLaughlin (1969), 0.56; Gray (1972) 0.21; Furnham and Henderson (1983), 0.47; and Furnham (1984), 0.40. While the actual/estimated correlations are significant, the data do not provide very strong support for the convergence of ordinary people's estimates and standardized test scores.

Another way of looking at people's conception is to get them to fake neurotic. Thus Salas administered the EPI twice to soldiers - once under normal conditions, and then they were asked to respond 'in a manner you would expect of a neurotic, badly adjusted soldier' (1968: 56). As predicted, under the latter conditions their scores rose significantly. There are many other studies which support this conclusion, namely that when asked to fake bad (or mad), neuroticism scores go up, while when asked to fake good, neuroticism scores go down (Power and MacRae, 1977; Furnham and Henderson, 1983). Though the scores change, they do not do so perfectly! In other words, though subjects know which direction to move on a neuroticism score from high to low, they do not (or cannot) move to the extremes.

Interestingly, the evidence suggests that it is not only 'normal' non-neurotic people who can simulate or fake neurotic, but neurotics can fake normal (Gendreau, Irvine and Knight, 1973). McCarthy and Furnham (1986) asked two groups of psychiatric patients - anxiety state, depressed - and a normal group to fill in two questionnaires twice: first responding honestly and then as they believed a 'normal person' might. The results showed that whereas 'normal' people tend to see other normals as much the same if not slightly less well adjusted than themselves, patients see themselves as less well adjusted than the normal person. The controls were significantly more able to predict the normal response to these measures than the patient groups were. However, the depressed and anxiety groups differed in the accuracy of their estimates and in their conceptions of normal functioning. The two patient groups did differ in their levels of accuracy; the depressed patients were generally fairly accurate in their estimate although holding a somewhat negative view of ordinary adjustment. The anxious patients' estimates were always further from the scale norms than those of the depressed patients and they substantially overestimated the adjustment of the ordinary personality and underestimated the adjustment of ordinary social behaviour. Overall, the anxious patients' estimates deviated from scale norms in the same direction as the controls, but this deviation was usually more extreme.

Thus it seems that it is not possible to generalize about abnormal
groups' perceptions of normality: psychiatrically disturbed patients are not necessarily less able than undisturbed normal people to perceive normality accurately. It is anxiety but not depression that appears to impair this ability.

It appears then that both normal and neurotic people have some idea of what normality and neuroses are, even though this is by no means perfect. One reason for them not being able to fake perfectly is that they may not realize the various dimensions of neuroticism. That is, they may recognize that say anxiety and obsessionality are neurotic, but not phobias or hysteria responses.

The second important case for investigating lay theories of neuroticism is to attempt to identify lay people's understanding of the dimensions of neuroticism. One way of going about this is to see which items in a neuroticism inventory people can identify. Furnham (1984) gave subjects the ninety-item EPQ and told them that twenty-three items measured neuroticism. Their task was to identify those twenty-three. Table 9.2 shows the results.

The mean number of items selected by the subjects was 21.3 (SD = 3.41), and correct identification for the twenty-three 'neurotic' items ranged from under 10 per cent to over 90 per cent, the mean correct identifications being 53.9 per cent. Six items were identified by over 70 per cent and they related primarily to worrying, while six items were identified by less than 30 per cent of the lay people and they related primarily to feeling bored and listless.

They seemed best able to detect items concerning anxiety, but less sensitive to items about depression. This finding was confirmed when another group of lay people were asked to rate 100 characteristics of people for how characteristic each was of neuroticism. The three most highly characteristic were 'tends often to be very anxious', 'tends to be highly strung', and 'finds it hard to relax'. When these ratings were factor-analysed, four quite clear factors emerged. These were labelled communication problems (shy, anti-social, erratic), unstable (emotionally labile, unable to concentrate), obsessional (ritualized, superstitious) and phobic (panics, repetitive). Although people may not be able to taxonomize types of neuroticism or even recognize items from all categories, their rating of traits tends to show a clear underlying structure. Once again, therefore, people are moderately good at perceiving the different types of neuroticism.

Thirdly, there is the issue of beliefs about the occurrence of neurotic traits in others as opposed to self. Furnham (1984) and others have demonstrated that people have a tendency to believe themselves to be significantly less neurotic, disturbed, depressed and generally 'mad' and more happy and stable than the average person. This appears to be a common adaptive feature of 'normal' people that is not found in psychiatric patients, which may help to account for their problems.

There remains a great deal of work to be done on lay theories of neurosis. Researchers have concentrated far more on the perceived characteristics of neuroticism than on its cause, occurrence or cure. Furthermore, little is known about the perception of people differing in neurotic symptoms about neurosis itself (McCarthy and Furnham, 1986). In view of the current research it would appear that neurotics have a different view of the level and extent of their own neurosis as well as that of non-neurotic people. Furthermore, the manifestations of neurosis may be culture- and time-specific in that, in certain cultures at specific times, it may be more or less acceptable to display forms of neurotic behaviour. Indeed these

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items from the EPQ</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3 Does your mood often go up and down?</td>
<td>45.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Do you ever feel 'just miserable' for no reason?</td>
<td>41.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Do you often worry about things you should not have done or said?</td>
<td>87.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Are you an irritable person?</td>
<td>25.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 Are your feelings easily hurt?</td>
<td>41.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 Do you often feel 'fed-up'?</td>
<td>25.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27 Are you often troubled about feelings of guilt?</td>
<td>75.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 Would you call yourself a nervous person?</td>
<td>58.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34 Are you a worrier?</td>
<td>62.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38 Do you worry about awful things that might happen?</td>
<td>91.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41 Would you call yourself tense or 'highly strung'?</td>
<td>79.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47 Do you worry about your health?</td>
<td>79.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54 Do you suffer from sleeplessness?</td>
<td>66.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>58 Have you often felt listless and tired for no reason?</td>
<td>16.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62 Do you often feel life is very dull?</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66 Do you worry a lot about your looks?</td>
<td>54.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>68 Have you ever wished that you were dead?</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>72 Do you worry too long after an embarrassing experience?</td>
<td>79.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75 Do you suffer from nerves?</td>
<td>54.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>77 Do you often feel lonely?</td>
<td>20.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80 Are you sometimes bubbling over with energy and sometimes very sluggish?</td>
<td>54.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>84 Are you easily hurt when people find fault with you or the work you do?</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>88 Are you touchy about some things?</td>
<td>37.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>53.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
trends may themselves be a function of the dominant lay theories prevailing at the time.

Other Related Dimensions

Semin, in his various studies on lay conceptions of extraversion (Semin and Chassein, 1985; Semin, Rosch and Chassein 1981), supported a social-constructionist position which stresses the dialectical relationship between social constructions of the world and psychological realities. ‘It is argued that hypothetico-deductive models of personality rely primarily on ordinary language description of persons and do not constitute higher order models’ (Semin and Chassein, 1985: 1). While the evidence they have accumulated may in fact support that position, what of other dimensions of personality? That is, are lay theories of all personality and individual difference measures equally good, and if not why not?

The first point worth mentioning is that not all personality dimensions are well understood by the layman. For instance one of the most extensively researched individual difference measures, namely locus of control, is not well understood. Furnham and Henderson (1982) found no significant difference between groups of subjects either faking good or bad on the Rotter scale. Similarly, Furnham and Henderson (1983) found a non-significant negative correlation between subjects’ actual and estimated locus-of-control scale scores. On the other hand, research by Semin and Hatfield (1988) suggests that, if lay people are given descriptions of prototypical internal or external people, they can with considerable accuracy identify items from a standard questionnaire that measures this construct. This suggests that the methods whereby lay theories are investigated can have dramatic effects on the apparent results. Thus whereas it seems that people do not recognize the dimension or concept of locus of control, once it is explained to them they appear immediately able to use it in faking studies. To a large extent this inability to predict or fake is also true of Snyder’s (1979) self-monitoring construct (Furnham and Henderson, 1982, 1983).

Secondly, it seems that certain well-used constructs, concepts or traits that are frequently discussed in everyday language are those where the differences between laymen and scientists are least great. That is, where the term, concept or dimension is well known to the layman, the difference between lay and expert descriptions is least great. That is perhaps a truism. However, it is not the case that lay and expert theories for the causes of these differences are apparent. For instance, Eysenck’s (1981) arousal theory of extraversion, with the idea that extraverts are under-aroused and introverts are over-aroused, is perhaps counter-intuitive for most lay people. Similarly

the neurotic paradox is equally non-commonsensical. That is to say that, although there might be instances where lay and expert/scientific theories are descriptively very similar, at a theoretical/explanatory level they may have nothing in common.

Conclusion

This chapter has considered the nature of common sense and everyday theories of personality. An underlying theme of this chapter, and the book in general, is the importance of common sense and the similarities rather than the differences between lay and academic conceptualizations of personality processes. At the heart of much of this research is the dichotomy between those researchers who stress the difference between science and common sense, and those who stress the similarities.

Textbooks in many of the social sciences continue to contrast science and common sense in a somewhat simplistic straw man way. Compare the way Kerlinger contrasts the two along five dimensions.

1 While the man in the street uses ‘theories’ and concepts, he ordinarily does so in a loose fashion. . . . The scientist, on the other hand, systematically builds his theoretical structures, tests them for internal consistency, and subjects aspects of them to empirical test. . . .

2 The scientist systematically and empirically tests his theories and hypotheses. The man in the street tests his ‘hypotheses’ too, but he tests them in what might be a selective fashion. . . . The sophisticated social scientist, knowing this ‘selection tendency’ to be a common psychological phenomenon, carefully guards his research against his own preconceptions and predictions and against selective support of his hypotheses. . . .

3 The scientist tries systematically to rule out variables that are possible ‘causes’ of the effects he is studying other than the variables that he has hypothesized to the ‘causes’. The layman seldom bothers to control his explanations of observed phenomena in a systematic manner. . . .

4 The scientist consciously and systematically pursues relations. The layman’s preoccupation with relations is loose, unsystematic, uncontrolled. He often seize, for example, on the fortuitous occurrence of two phenomena and immediately links them indissolubly as cause and effect. . . .

5 The scientist, when attempting to explain the relations among observed phenomena, carefully rules out what have been called ‘metaphysical explanations’. (1973: 3–5)

Despite this vision of the heroic scientist versus the muddled layman, Kerlinger attempts to dispel erroneous stereotypes of science! However, his later definition of scientific research is
'systematic, controlled, empirical and critical investigation of hypothetical propositions about the presumed relations among natural phenomena' (1973: 11). Clearly not all psychologists or social scientists are as dismissive of common sense in favour of disinterested empiricism.

Within the academic scientific community there is frequently antipathy towards disciplines which investigate common sense, or which by ignoring common sense rediscover it. Giddens (1987), who considered sociological research, argued that at the heart of objections to the discipline is the idea that sociologists state the obvious but with an air of discovery. Worse still, in that it offers explanations that do not ring true, sociology is doubly redundant because it not only tells us what we already know, but it parades the familiar in a garb which conceals its proper nature.

Giddens attempts to rebut these arguments thus: first, common knowledge (Britain is particularly strike-prone; there has been a sharp increase in one-parent families) is frequently wrong and may lead to prejudice, intolerance and discrimination; secondly, correct knowledge may be the consequence of sociological research; thirdly, common knowledge about behaviour differs from one group/milieu to another; fourthly, people are normally able discursively to identify only a little of the complex conventional framework of their activities; fifth, behaviour may have unintended as well as intended consequences, and ways of acting, thinking and feeling may exist outside the consciousness of individuals; sixth, ordinary language is too ambiguous for dispassionate analytic scientific description.

A major problem in the social as opposed to the natural sciences is that the theories and concepts invented by social scientists circulate in and out of the social worlds they are coined to analyse. But while lay concepts obstinately intrude into the technical discourse of social science, the opposite is also true. Hence the most interesting and innovative ideas in the social sciences risk becoming banal:

the achievements of the social sciences tend to become submerged from view by their very success. On the other hand, exactly because of this we can in all seriousness make the claim that the social sciences have influenced 'their' world - the universe of human social activity - much more strongly than the natural sciences have influenced 'theirs'. The social sciences have been reflexively involved in a most basic way with those transformations of modernity which give them their main subject-matter. (Giddens, 1987: 21)

Despite the acknowledgement of the important role common sense or lay beliefs have in both the determining of social behaviour and the formulation of academic theories, it is not being suggested that they do not differ. As has been outlined for various reasons and on various criteria, lay theories of personality are different from those proposed by psychologists.

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