Same Roots Different Branches: The Study of Personality by Researchers from Different Disciplines

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Abstract

Increasing specialisation in most academic fields has led to the compartmentalisation of knowledge into highly specific fields of enquiry. As a result, researchers working in different but related fields rarely get the opportunity to collaborate and pool their knowledge. This situation is particularly problematic in the social sciences, given that the complexity of human experience usually necessitates the approach of a situation from multiple complementary angles. The current study is the result of a collaborative exercise between an organisational psychologist, specialising in the study of human behaviour at the workplace, and a clinical psychologist, specialising in the diagnosis and treatment of psychological disorders and behavioural and emotional difficulties. This paper addresses the common underlying epistemological and ontological frameworks that both authors subscribe to, which give rise to similar viewpoints on phenomena. It subsequently describes how these two researchers approach the study of personality by adopting a methodology that embraces both idiographic and nomothetic approaches. It also explores how the authors have examined the perceptions of specific professionals, namely clinical and counselling psychologists, from the perspectives of organisational and clinical psychology. The instrument used as a means of data-collection for this study, the repertory grid, is also described. Subsequently findings emerging from the data collected using this technique are presented and discussed in the light of the theories reviewed. The data collected using this technique, based on a social constructivist philosophy, also lends itself to quantitative analysis, bridging the divide between idiographic and nomothetic research methods.

Keywords: Interdisciplinarity, repertory grid, personality, unconscious motives, clinical and counselling psychologists.

Interdisciplinarity and specialisation

The relative merits of specialisation and interdisciplinarity have been the subject of much academic debate in recent years. On the one hand, the increase in knowledge in most fields has led to increasing levels of specialisation. Siow (1998), for example, claimed that researchers cannot remain abreast of all the new advances in their respective disciplines, and therefore are required to specialise in order to keep up with just one particular area within their specific discipline. On the other hand, Moghaddam (1997) claimed that the idea that increased specialisation leads to greater efficiency is a myth.

More recently, authors have taken somewhat more moderate positions on the issue. Utzerath and Fernandez (2017), for example, pointed out that because of the increasing complexity of issues being studied by researchers, examining an issue from the viewpoint of one specialisation is inefficient and may lead to incomplete findings. Jacobs (2014), on the other hand, purported that maintaining boundaries between the different disciplines is necessary, although he conceded that interdisciplinary research does have its benefits when carried out rigorously. Bursztyn (2008), writing a decade ago, claimed that while the 20th century could be seen as an era of specialisation, interdisciplinarity would be the focus of the 21st century.

Our position as researchers is that examining an issue from the points of view of different specialists results in a richer and more complete understanding of the issue in question. This paper discusses the above in the light of a specific research question, namely clinical and counselling psychologists' perceptions regarding the personality traits prevalent in their fellow professionals.

Ontological and epistemological considerations

Crotty (1998) claimed that researchers have a tendency to approach chosen methodologies with a number of assumptions and abstract principles that consist of their beliefs about the world. Guba and Lincoln (1994) regarded these worldviews as paradigms which guide researchers. They explained that paradigms include questions regarding the nature of reality (ontology), questions about that which can be known (epistemology) and questions regarding the methods used to uncover the desired knowledge (methodology). These assumptions influence the manner in which researchers approach their research as well as the ways in which they collect and interpret their data.

Broadly speaking, ontological perspectives may be placed on a continuum, ranging from naïve realism, to critical realism, to relativism (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Positivist paradigms derive from realist ontologies which emphasise the existence of an external reality, an objective truth which is identifiable and measurable, if the right methods are employed (Crotty, 1998; Ponterotto, 2005). Constructivists-

interpretivists, on the other hand, do not believe in a single, true reality but hold that there are multiple, constructed realities (Ponterotto, 2005). Constructionism assumes a relativist ontology which is rooted in a symbolic interactionist perspective that rests on the assumption that human interaction creates meaning (Denzin, 2007), and that objectivity and truth are borne of community traditions, and not "by-products of individual minds" (Gergen, 2000, p.14). Between these two poles lies a form of middle-ground that can be considered to be a less extreme form of objectivism, and which also considers the importance of multiple and constructed realities. Both authors of this work subscribe to this post-positivist paradigm which espouses a critical, rather than a naïve realist ontology. Critical realism, in line with positivism, asserts that there is an objective version of reality (Bhaskar, 1975; 1989), however it contends that this reality is only partially apprehendible (Gorski, 2013; Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Modell, 2009). The implications of critical realism as an epistemology allow for the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods in some situations (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Venkatesh et al., 2013; Zachariadis et al., 2013). The repertory grid is therefore an ideal instrument of choice, since its theoretical underpinnings emerge from both quantitative and qualitative traditions (see below).

There are also some implications regarding the construct of personality when this is viewed under the lens of critical realism. Psychological theorists do not agree on the relative importance of personality, compared to other factors, in determining attitudes and behaviour. Indeed, the social constructionist view of reality (e.g. Gergen, 1985) claims that since reality does not exist objectively, personality is not an objective phenomenon and attitudes and behaviours are determined by social interactions, rather than by pre-existing traits. However, most psychologists agree that the construct of personality is useful in at least partly predicting attitudes and behaviour.

These latter concepts are more in line with our view that inner structures and a relational approach to personality, which views structures as emerging from significant relationships, are not mutually exclusive. In our view, an equilibrium or middle-ground between realism and relativism is achievable. This can be done if one considers personality as a matrix of fixed inner structures or traits that can be considered to be somewhat stable (realism), yet at the same time idiosyncratic, and to a certain extent influenced by context and relationships (relativism). This emerges from our common belief in an intertwining co-creation of meaning, a world where subject and object cannot be separated.

Personality and job performance

While various theorists define personality in different ways (Eaves, 1989), most agree that the term refers to a complex pattern of deeply embedded, long-lasting psychological characteristics. These characteristics are largely non-conscious and not

easily altered, and express themselves in most aspects of functioning. Taken as a whole, they comprise the individual's distinctive pattern of feeling, thinking, coping and behaving (Millon & Davis, 1996)**.** Most authors concur that personality is a stable construct. However, there is also consensus that some traits can be flexible over the lifespan.

The Big Five model of personality (e.g. McCrae & Costa, 1988) is the model most highly supported by empirical evidence. This model posits that personality can be measured on five continua, namely extraversion, emotional stability, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and openness to experience. Organisational psychologists have a long tradition of trying to use measurable personality traits to predict aspects of job performance. A meta-analysis conducted by Barrick and Mount (1991) found links between some personality traits and performance in specific types of jobs. More specifically, conscientiousness was found to be important for performance across all jobs (see also Judge et al., 1999). Extraversion was important for jobs requiring social interaction, such as salespersons and managers, and openness to experience was important for jobs requiring frequent training and change. The links between one's personality and one's future career have also been widely recognised by the career counselling literature. In fact, Holland's theory of career types (e.g. Holland, 1973; 1997) together with an associated tool (the Vocational Preference Inventory – Holland, 1985) is one of the most widely used in this context.

Theoretical perspectives on the traits of clinical and counselling psychologists

Clinical and counselling psychologists have traditionally been perceived as being helpful to others, empathic, caring, kind, trustworthy, good at listening, good at communicating, independent, insightful, and introspective (Hill et al., 2013). In the middle of the last century, Rogers (1951) laid down the ideal characteristics of psychotherapists (i.e. non-judgmental, genuine, and able to view their clients with unconditional positive regard) as being the necessary conditions of psychotherapy and the key movers of change within the client.

Wampold et al. (2011) summarised qualities and actions of effective therapists as consisting of verbal fluency, interpersonal perception, affective modulation and expressiveness, warmth and acceptance, empathy, and focus on others. In a similar vein, the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics' Occupational Outlook Handbook outlined seven traits and skill sets which are considered necessary for an aspiring psychologist. These are analytical skills, communication skills, integrity, interpersonal skills, observational skills, patience, and problem-solving skills (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). McCaulley (1981) has indicated that the most frequent combination of personality traits for clinical and counselling psychologists on the Myers Briggs test is Extraverted-Intuitive-Feeling-Perceiving. Other authors, however, have pointed out that this emphasis on the positive aspects of psychologists, which

they often do possess, has led to a neglect of the darker aspects of their personality constellations. This has probably led to what Maroda (as cited in Sussman, 2007) referred to as the common perception of psychologists as intellectually, spiritually and morally superior.

Although psychologists regularly claim that their primary motivation in choosing their profession was "to help people", there is a body of knowledge which evidences that the choice of career as a helping professional is determined by multiple factors. These are complex, intertwined, only partially conscious, and often not well-understood until late in the psychologist's career (Di Caccavo, 2002; Holt & Luborsky, 1958; Maroda, 2005; Nikcevic et al., 2007; Norcross & Farber, 2005; Sussman, 2007). Sussman (2007) referred to unconscious motives and to Trivers' (as cited in Sussman, 2007) assertion that self-deception is also a personality trait which is deeply rooted in human nature. This leads to psychologists' tendencies to delude themselves regarding their motivations for the choice of profession (Maroda, as cited in Sussman, 2007). Norcross and Farber (2005) and Nikcevic, Kramolisova-Advani and Spada (2007) claimed that the motivation for choosing a career in mental health may arise from a need to resolve personal psychological issues and childhood struggles by means of their profession. Di Caccavo (2006) also referred to parentification that arises from professionals' histories of childhood caregiving in situations where their parents were emotionally unavailable. This, according to the author, would lead to an internalisation of a caretaking role that would allow carers to care for themselves by caring for others. Sussman (2007) identified three types of unconscious motives in psychotherapists, namely 1) motives stemming from instinctual aims, i.e. psychological needs related to sexual and aggressive instincts; 2) motives related to narcissism and the development of the self, i.e. the need to feel affirmed by others; and 3) motives involving object relations, i.e. the need to feel intimately connected to others. It is important to note, however, that these authors concur that unconscious motives can be kept in check and can even be helpful to psychologists as long as they have been made conscious via their own personal psychotherapy. Norcross and Farber (2005) also asserted that the neurotic motive for healing the self is usually balanced by the less-neurotic motive of altruism. The personality of the psychologist is considered to be fundamentally important, since the treatment outcome depends largely on the person who is providing the psychotherapy. In a number of studies, the differences between types of treatment were found to be negligible when compared to the differences amongst therapists in determining the effectiveness of psychotherapy (Kim et al., 2006; Lutz et al., 2007; Wampold, 2006; Wampold & Brown, 2005). It appears, therefore, that psychologists, unlike other professions, depend on their personhood to provide a good service to clients. It was noted by the authors of the current study that the research in this area is relatively dated, and mostly focused on strengths and values. Although theories regarding the negative traits of psychologists abound, few researchers have attempted to validate them empirically, especially in the local context.

Rationale for the research method – the repertory grid technique

Individual psychologists may have different views on the personalities of clinical and counselling psychologists. The repertory grid technique, with its idiographic emphasis, is the ideal method for this study, as it is designed to help understand these nuanced differences. This technique has also been shown to be useful in eliciting tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1958), such as the knowledge professionals have about their own profession, which they are not necessarily immediately aware (or conscious) of. Clinical and counselling psychologists' perceptions about their colleagues could shed light on what they believe to be ideal qualities that they possibly aspire to themselves. Traits which are perceived to be negative or undesirable to participants, and consequently repressed or denied in themselves, can also be elicited with ease by attributing them to others. This method bypasses the censorship of conscious thought through projection, which was defined by Freud as the denial of the existence of unpleasant thoughts, impulses, and aspects of the self by attributing them to others or to inanimate objects. In sum, this method allows for the possibility of participants to refer unconsciously to their own traits, whilst consciously talking about their fellow professionals.

The underlying theoretical basis for the research method used in our study is George Kelly's Personal Construct Theory (1955). Kelly argued that individuals understand their world according to their own frame of reference, which is derived from their upbringing and experiences. This knowledge is stored in what are called *personal constructs*. Kelly (1955) posits that: "A construct is a way in which some things are being construed as being alike and yet different from others" (p.105). A distinctive feature of personal constructs is that they are dichotomous – e.g. an individual may perceive others as being good or bad, friendly or hostile, strong or weak, etc. (Kelly 1955; 1969). Although essentially cognitive, constructs also have motivational and emotional qualities.

The repertory grid technique was developed by Kelly (1961) as a method of eliciting personal constructs. Originally used primarily as a research tool in clinical psychology (Bjorklund, 2008), it has subsequently been used in a variety of research areas, including education (e.g. Pill, 2005), and management and business (e.g. Rogers & Ryals, 2007). A further advantage of this method is that it combines the strengths of both idiographic and nomothetic approaches, and results in data which can be analysed both qualitatively and quantitatively (Catania & Darmanin Kissaun, 2016), thus falling perfectly in line with our critical realist paradigm described above.

Method

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the University Research Ethics Committee in December 2017. Five clinical/counselling psychologists were recruited by means of convenience sampling. Information letters were sent via email and participants who were interested came forward of their own accord. Their informed consent was obtained before the interview and permission to write down their responses in the grid was also sought. Participants were fully aware of their rights to remain anonymous and to withdraw from the study without providing justification. Participants assigned pseudonyms to the psychologists they mentioned in order to safeguard their identities. The duration of the interviews was between 60 and 90 minutes each.

The repertory grid interview can be regarded as a particular form of structured interview (Fransella et al., 2004). The process involves 4 consecutive steps: 1) agreement on the topic under consideration; 2) identification of a series of related examples or *elements*; 3) eliciting *constructs* from the elements chosen by the participant, using probing questions to clarify the construct where necessary; 4) the *ranking* or *rating* of each element on each construct. (For a more detailed description of this process, see Catania & Darmanin Kissaun, 2016.)

Participants were asked to compare examples of possible behaviour shown by different exemplars of psychologists (e.g. "the most empathic psychologist you are aware of", "the psychologist who has the best communication skills", etc.) and indicate how different and similar they are to each other. The two opposites thus elicited formed the opposite poles of a *construct.* Each exemplar was then rated on this construct using a seven point scale (1: person very like the emergent pole of the construct - 7: person very like the opposite pole of the construct) and the result recorded in the first row of a repertory grid. This procedure was repeated using various combinations of exemplars until no further new constructs were generated. Preliminary analysis gave rise to 41 unique constructs.

Summary of the findings and discussion

The constructs elicited included some which have been traditionally ascribed to psychologists. These are presented on the left hand side on the table below. The right hand side of the table portrays traits which are less likely to be ascribed to psychologists, as they tend to be perceived as less desirable. In keeping with the tenets underpinning Personal Construct theory, the traits lie on a continuum, with the elicited traits presented below on opposite poles.

Self-confident/self-assured	...	Self-doubting
Fair/just	...	Biased
Authentic	...	Shady/shifty
Ethical	...	Breaks confidentiality/boundaries
Congruent	...	Incongruent
Genuine	...	Scheming
Humane	...	Strategic
Skilled	...	Relatively unskilled
Intuitive	...	Work by the book
Able to work with clients from diverse social backgrounds	...	Works best with one type of client/socially selective/snobbish
Flexible	...	Rigid
Family oriented	...	Career oriented
Other oriented	...	Self-absorbed
Knowledgeable/academically strong/well read	...	Not as well read/ academically incompetent
Valuing of others' opinions	...	Narcissistic
Caring towards clients	...	Narcissistic
Self-disclosing re own flaws and imperfections	...	Guarded
Humble	...	Likes to show off/inappropriately self-assured/boastful
Genuinely interested in helping	...	Driven by power/status/prestige
Giving priority to relationships	...	Gives priority to self-interest
Able to experience awe/joy in the presence of their clients	...	Muted
Warm	...	Aloof
Identity based on various roles	...	Identity solely tied to being a psychologist

Some of the traits and characteristics mentioned by participants are in line with psychoanalytic interpretations regarding psychologists' unconscious motives, which address narcissistic needs and the wish for affirmation by others (Sussman, 2007). Narcissism involves an inflated ego ideal that fuels perfectionistic aspirations of omniscience and omnipotence. The danger lies in the psychologists' unconscious need to use the patient as a *mirroring self-object* (Kohut, 1986), in an attempt to regulate their own self-esteem. Narcissism has also been considered as the underside of shame by Morrison (1989) and as a defence against inferiority in some of the psychoanalytic literature. In her study on shame in psychotherapy, Darmanin Kissaun

(2017) reported that her participants were aware that one means by which they attenuated shame and feelings of inferiority was to obtain professional qualifications.

Of particular interest was the construct referring to the therapist's identity as being exclusively tied to their profession. The "god complex" is referred to by Kirmayer (2003) who cautions psychotherapists not to over-identify with their healing powers. In a study by Weber and Gans (2003), personal self-esteem appeared to be inextricably linked to professional self-esteem. Psychologists have their own idealised image of the perfect professional, which is further perpetuated by patients and the public. However, failure to be effective in "healing" patients gives way to increased awareness of the psychologist's limitations and leads to a more realistic and accepting professional ego. Vella (2017) remarks that warranting bodies and psychological associations may perpetuate this view of the 'perfect professional', causing aspects of the real therapist to be repressed and masked by the false therapist. This, in turn, may be exacerbated by the small size of the island, which gives rise to the probability of professionals occupying multiple roles (Abela & Sammut Scerri, 2010). This augments the sense of exposure and social visibility (Clark, 2012) experienced by Maltese psychologists. Darmanin Kissaun (2017) further reported that her participants often felt shame in supervision and the fear of appearing incompetent before their supervisors, with whom they have relationships in a number of different contexts. Many a time, this fear of exposure prevented psychologists from being honest about their own struggles with patients and often led to them seeing patients without supervisory assistance or support. This might necessitate further thinking regarding the training of psychologists in Malta who might be particularly prone to fall prey to their unacknowledged personal struggles with shame and inadequacy.

Conclusion and implications of this study

The organisational psychological literature shows that congruence between personality traits and career choice results in a greater possibility of individuals experiencing job satisfaction (Holland, 1973; Judge et al., 2002; Lounsbury et al., 2003). Furthermore, job satisfaction is linked with other positive organisational outcomes, such as engagement (e.g. Warr & Inceoglu, 2012), resistance to burnout (e.g. Huebner, 1992), and better performance (Iaffaldano & Muchinsky, 1985). Clearly, better performance is desirable in the case of clinical and counselling psychologists, as the quality of their work has a significant direct impact on the quality of life of their clients. The results of this study help us understand better the complexity underlying the reasons why clinical and counselling psychologists choose these respective professions. These results, possibly augmented by further findings from more data collection and other studies, can be used to design a self-assessment tool exploring the personality traits underlying psychologists' choice of profession. Such

a tool can be extremely useful, both when prospective psychologists are exploring whether or not to enter the profession and as a tool for existing psychologists to discuss during their personal psychotherapy and supervision. The results of this study also have implications for the training of psychologists in Malta, given the difficulties they experience that arise from the multiple roles they occupy. These implications underscore the many advantages of examining an issue from multiple viewpoints, confirming that interdisciplinarity results in a richer and more complete understanding of the issue in question.

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Bio-notes

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Dr Greta Darmanin Kissaun is a clinical psychologist and psychotherapist who has worked extensively with severe mental illness. Before joining the Department of Psychology she was employed as a Senior Clinical Psychologist at Mount Carmel Hospital, Malta. She is a resident academic at the Psychology Department, University of Malta where she has been coordinator of the professional Master's Programme in Clinical Psychology since 2005. She is currently Head of the Department of Psychology and Deputy Dean of the Faculty for Social Wellbeing at the University of Malta.