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## Parental Influences on Personality: A Comparison of Trait and Phenomenological Theories

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**Abstract:** Baumrind's theory is based on the two vital elements of parental responsiveness, which includes warmth, 'supportiveness', and acceptance, and parental demandingness, which considers disciplinary strategies and methods of behavior control. The job of a parent is to influence, teach, and direct their children to become secure, happy, independent adults, and such things as communication styles, expectations, and parenting techniques can either help or hinder this process. Baumrind's theory provides a great guideline in helping parents identify valuable techniques and recognizing areas that need change, but it should only be used as a framework to build upon. Each parent needs to define their own child's needs and work to effectively meet those needs, focusing on the individual and using the concept of parenting styles as a tool to help children become strong, happy, healthy adults.

**Keywords:** Baumrind's theory, Personality, parenting styles

### Introduction

A seemingly obvious fact about human nature is that our personality is influenced by our parents. Intuitively, it seems as if the way our parents raise us exerts an enduring influence on the nature of our personality. By teaching certain types of behavior and by punishing actions of which they disapprove, parents may significantly influence the behavioral and emotional styles of their children.

This intuition, however, contrasts with a second one. Common knowledge tells us that siblings often differ greatly from one another. One brother may be outgoing, the other shy. One sister may be conservative, the other liberal. Since siblings have the same parents, and parents tend to treat their children similarly, such examples seem to suggest that parents' style of child rearing might make little difference to the personality of their children. The question of parental influences on personality, then, is an interesting puzzle for scientific theory and research in personality psychology.

Theories of personality have taken different viewpoints on the question of parental influences on personality. This paper addresses two theories that present contrasting views. These are the trait and phenomenological theories of personality.

In the trait theories, the basic variables of the theory are people's traits, that is, their "broad predispositions . . . to respond in particular ways" (Pervin & John, 2001, p. 226). Most trait theories try to identify a common set of traits that can be used to describe the personality of any individual. These "nomothetic" trait theories rely on the statistical procedure of factor analysis

to identify dimensions that can be used summarize individual differences in personality traits. Researchers using this technique commonly identify a set of five trait dimensions. These Big Five personality traits include extroversion, neuroticism, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and openness to experience (Pervin & John, 2001).

Once one identifies a set of basic traits in this manner, a primary question is to identify where the traits come from. Why do some people have more or less of a given trait than others? Almost all trait theorists have sought biological explanations for variations in traits. People are seen to inherit a given level of a trait in the same way that they might inherit hair color or height. This viewpoint is consistent with findings on genetics and personality, which indicate that identical twins' personalities are far more similar than would be expected by chance (Pervin & John, 2001).

The trait theories, then, have an interesting implication for the question of parental influences on personality. If personality is defined in terms of personality traits, and if traits are thought to be inherited, then parental styles of child rearing would appear to have little influence on children's personality. The only influence parents would have on their children's personality is a biological one. They pass their genes on to their children. According to the trait theories, parents interpersonal interactions with their children would exert little effect on the child's personality development.

A very different view is put forth by proponents of phenomenological theories of personality. The primary focus of the phenomenological theories is the individual's subjective experience of their world, that is, their phenomenological experience (Pervin & John, 2001). In particular, people's subjective experience of themselves, or their self-concept, is seen as the core of individuals' personalities.

Among the most prominent of the phenomenological theories of personality is the self theory of Carl Rogers (Pervin & John, 2001). Rogers contended that people's psychological experiences are not determined by objective events in the world, but by their subjective interpretations of these events. These interpretations, in turn, are heavily influenced by a person's self concept. Specifically, people may experience psychological distress when they cannot integrate their daily experiences with their sense of who they really are, as might be manifested by a person's saying that "I just haven't been acting like myself lately." Alternatively, a person might feel guilty or depressed if their actions do not meet their "ideal self," that is, the person's subjective sense of what they ideally should be like; in such circumstances, a person might report that "I'm disappointed with myself." People's self-views, then, are a primary determinant of their overall experiences.

## Discussion

With regard to the question of parental influences, Rogers' phenomenological theory has a very different implication than that deriving from trait theory. According to Rogers, self concept, like other aspects of phenomenological experience, is not inherited but instead develops gradually as people interact with the world and the other people around them. Rogers suggests that people develop a positive self-concept if they experience "unconditional positive regard," that is, if people consistently respect and accept them for who they really are. People who experience unconditional positive regard, then, should have a positive view of self that enables them to approach daily activities in an open-minded, psychologically flexible and creative manner. In contrast, less positive personality development occurs if people experience "conditions of worth," that is, if other people establish criteria, or conditions, for what is valued behavior. Such individuals may experience a more negative view of self that leads them to approach life activities in a more cautious, tentative, self-critical, and unconfident style. Since parents are generally the major source of influence in the early years of child development, the extent to which parents display unconditional positive regard to their children, as opposed to imposing conditions of worth, should influence long-term personality development.

A primary question, then, is how one might be able to test these theories one against the other. Since personality theorists are attempting to development conceptions of human nature that can be evaluated by objective empirical evidence, it should be possible to marshal scientific evidence that bears on the relative merits of the two theories. For the question of parental influences on personality, one key source of evidence would be longitudinal studies, that is, studies that examine the same individuals across a long period of time. Ideally, such work would measure aspects of child rearing early in life and determine whether they predict personality characteristics as measured later in life.

Such a study has been conducted by Harrington, Block, & Block (1987). They studied a large group of people at two points in time: early childhood and adolescence. During early childhood, the researchers obtained measures of the degree to which each child's parents exhibited a "Rogerian" style of child rearing, that is, a style in which few conditions of worth were imposed on children and, instead, children were accepted for who they are and were allowed to explore the world freely. There were two such measures. One was a self-report of parents' child-rearing styles, and the other was an observational measure in which researchers observed parents interacting with their children and coded whether the parents acted in a prototypic Rogerian manner. They two measures were combined into an overall index of Rogerian child rearing.

In adolescence, the researchers obtained a measure of creativity. Teachers were asked to rate the degree to which the research participants, who were their students, approached tasks in an open-minded, creative manner. Since the researchers had measures on the same individuals at two points in time, they were able to determine the degree to which the childhood measure of parenting style predicted the adolescent

measure of creativity.

The finding strongly supported Rogers' theory of personality development (Harrington et al., 1987). Just as Rogers would have predicted, children whose parents treated them in a Rogerian style turned out to be adolescents who were judged as being more creative. Child rearing style was a statistically significant predictor of creativity. Importantly, this was true even when the researchers controlled for a measure of intelligence that also was obtained during childhood. It is not merely the case that intelligent children were treated in a Rogerian style and also were creative. Instead, even controlling for intelligence, parental child rearing predicted creativity.

### Conclusion

In evaluating the two theories, the results clearly support Rogers' phenomenological perspective, as noted above. Children's experiences of alternative parenting styles seem to have influenced a significant aspect of their personality and to have done so in exactly the manner Rogers would have anticipated. In contrast, the results conflict with the trait theory position that personality characteristics are largely inherited and that aspects of the environment that are shared by multiple siblings, such as parental child rearing style, exert little influence on personality characteristics later in life. Since the work of Harrington et al. (1987) was conducted a number of years ago, one might ask how trait theorists, in light of these results, could maintain their view that parental styles of child rearing exert little influence on personality. The results would seem to provide objective evidence against their theories. One possibility is that trait theories are focusing only on specific, narrow aspects of human personality, and that parental child rearing styles exert an influence on other aspects of personality that trait theorists have overlooked. Recall that, as described above, the core variables of trait theory are people's average tendencies to exhibit general styles of emotion or behavior. It is noteworthy that none of these personality trait variables addresses people's self-concept. Although trait theorists surely do recognize that people have self-concepts, they seem to have eliminated the notion of self-concept from the core of personality. Self-concept is not a "personality structure" in their view. This seems hard to defend, since people's views of themselves are such a central feature of psychological experience. By focusing on overt styles of behavior, rather than the inner psychological life of the individual, including his or her views of self, trait theories may be missing an important aspect of human nature. The development of a stable conception of oneself and one's personal qualities is a critical feature of personality, and it may be one that is shaped to a large degree by interactions between children and their parents.

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