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**Motivation: A Critical Consideration of Freud and Rogers' Seminal Conceptualisations**

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**Abstract**

Humans vary in many aspects of their psychology with differences routinely found in patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviours, setting individuals apart across time and place. Though many psychologists have attempted to account for these individual differences, one area that has continued to generate interest and disagreement is the concept of motivation. Today, understanding behavioural motivation remains one of the most important questions facing personality theorists. In an attempt to better account for human motivation, the present exploration reviews seminal theoretical positions put forward by Sigmund Freud from a Psychoanalytical perspective and contrastingly, that of Carl Rogers from the Humanistic approach. Critical consideration is specifically applied to how verifiable each perspective may be and the degree of empirical support either account has attained to date. Whilst understanding human motivation is not a new endeavour, the present exploration provides a contemporary critical assessment of traditional psychological explanations.

**Key words:** *Motivation; Freud; Drive Theory; Rogers; Self-Actualisation, Personality*

## Introduction

Over time the concept of personality has stimulated considerable theorising amongst psychologists and researchers. Longstanding debates surround contrasting positions of trait theorists and social-cognitive theorists, widely acknowledged as the ‘Person-Situation debate’ (Dolliver, 1995; Kossowska, Jasko, & Brycz, 2014). Alongside this, the utility and reliability of wide ranging psychometric assessment tools that seek to measure individual differences and specific personality features, continue to generate disagreement from opposing positions within the literature (Blecharz, Horodyska, Zarychta, Adamiec, & Luszczynska, 2015; Boduszek, Debowska, Dhingra, & DeLisi, 2016; Debowska, Boduszek, Kola, & Hyland, 2014; Szczygieł, Jasielska, & Wytykowska, 2015; Willmott et al., 2017). Historically however, theories have failed to agree upon even the basic structure of the concept of a personality. Whilst Sigmund Freud and Carl Rogers both explore the concept of personality holistically, rather than studying specific behavioural features in isolation, the underlying principles of each perspective remain intrinsically different, grounded in contrasting assumptions. Freud was a determinist from a Psychoanalytical perspective believing in the role of nature and biology, and considered human functioning to be rooted in innate, instinctual forces (Nye, 2000). He suggested no aspect of human functioning to be caused by chance and therefore all behaviour is considered explicable. This, a conclusion Freud drew from use of therapeutic techniques, such as dream analysis and free association (Freud, 1957). Alternatively, whilst the basic underpinnings of Carl Roger’s theory of personality were also derived from his use of person-centred therapy, he was a Humanistic Phenomenologist who proposed humans to be free willed beings, living and perceiving the world uniquely according to a subjective view held of their reality (Geller, 1984; Rogers, 1967). Rogers also considered humans to be active agents within their own experiences and motivations throughout the life-course, therefore differing from Freud’s notion that early experience shapes adult functioning. Despite this important difference, Rogers nonetheless

agreed with the concept of innate influence, proposing individuals to be instinctively directed towards progressive growth and fulfilment (Rogers, 1967). Both Freud and Rogers studied abnormal and problematic functioning within clients receiving their therapy, and this subsequently formed the basis from which their explanations of 'normal' human functioning and motivation, derives.

### **Sigmund Freud: The Psychoanalytic Approach**

Adopting a drive theory explanation, Freud suggested innate drives, seeking gratification, to be the primary motivation of all human functioning. Such drives, are considered to be sexual and aggressive in nature, as well as instinctively driven towards the preservation of life in that, pain is avoided and hunger needs are satisfied (Freud, 1929). Equally important, self-destructive predispositions, termed death instincts, are thought to be manifested in motivations that incur risk to life. The combination of which, Freud suggests, operate by energy held within each individual (Freud, 1929). Moreover, although contrary to other theories of the time, Freud suggested the notion of an unconscious construct whereby, not only do such desires and instinctual energy exist and motivate human functioning, but are actively retained in order to protect an individual's self-esteem (Nye, 2000). From such a psychoanalytical perspective, levels of consciousness contain material that is either, *conscious*; in that it is present and in awareness, *preconscious*; where material is not consciously present but readily accessible, or *unconscious*; whereby material is kept deeply hidden from conscious awareness. Such unconscious motivations are thought to be withheld from consciousness by drawing upon defence mechanisms that prevent the unacceptable and distressing nature of the desires from entering awareness (Freud, 1957). Freud suggested that employing such mechanisms, if not used excessively, can be psychologically healthy for the individual, heightening feelings of self-worth and esteem (Maltby, Day, & Macaskill, 2010). However, in explaining these

mechanisms Freud failed to stipulate or offer any explanation of what may constitute excessive use, something which many critics have drawn upon when arguing a lack of completeness in psychoanalytic accounts of motivation (Cooper, 2002; Shor, 1961).

In addition to highlighting the importance of the unconscious in accounting for human motivation, Freud proposed the concept of a structure of personality that consists of three components which are thought to assist 'instinctual drives' in obtaining gratification (Freud, 1957). The first element, termed the Id, exists within the unconscious psyche and operating primary process thinking in accordance with the pleasure principle, impulsively and often irrationally seeks immediate gratification of innate drives. Freud suggested if development is successful through the psychosexual stages, without fixation occurring and obtaining full gratification of desires at each stage, the concept of an Ego then begins to develop (Fuller, 1992; Pervin, Cervone, & John, 2005). Moreover, the Ego which functions predominately in the conscious mind, operating secondary process thinking and governed according to reality principles, begins to manage the Id's impulsive desires rationally and logically. The desires of the Id become socialised, with behaviour beginning to align with social rules due to learning that such sexual and aggressive drives are often inconsistent with those of others in the social world (Nye, 2000). Freud suggested the final element of personality to develop is the Super Ego and in adopting moral principles acquired during childhood and parental nurture, governs impulses, serving as an individual's conscience which in turn helps to manage behavioural motivations (Freud, 1957). Whilst highly theoretical in nature and often criticised as lacking the ability to inform hypotheses that can be strictly operationalised and tested empirically (Cooper, 2002; Willmott, Boduszek & Robinson, 2017), Freud proposed each of the aforementioned structures of personality to be in constant conflict with one another, arguing that 'psychic energy' and innate drives stemming unconsciously from within the Id, are captured by the ego and super ego in order to temporarily regain power (Freud, 1957; Nye,

2000). Therefore, the unpredictability and lack of consistency often found in human motivation, can be explained in terms of an ever fluctuating balance of conflicting energy between such structures. Although Freud proposed all behaviour to be primarily driven by the Id's unconscious desires and need for instant gratification, he proposed social and environmental factors adopted by the Ego and Super ego structures, also influence motivation. Whilst many Freudian concepts are arguably without scientific support, social and environmental influence as an important regulator of the motivations underlying specific behaviour is perhaps the most well supported concept within contemporary applied research (Debowska, Boduszek, & Willmott, 2017; Dolinski, 2013; Grzyb & Dolinski, 2017; Hełka et al., 2015; Ryan et al., 2018; Spink, Boduszek, Debowska, & Bale, in press; Willmott & Ioannou, 2017).

### **Carl Rogers: The Humanistic Approach**

Although Carl Rogers also viewed motivation as rooted in the innate, differences exist between how he and Freud conceptualised motivation. Whilst Freud proposed that to truly understand an individual the need to access the unconscious construct of the mind is necessary, Rogers instead suggested that the unique and subjective manner in which humans perceive and interpret experiences in the world, has important implications for how an individual subsequently behaves (Rogers, 1989). Disagreeing with Freud's interpretation of defence mechanisms, Rogers alternatively suggested a lack of acceptance of truths about oneself results in unhealthy underlying self-concepts developing. Moreover, Rogers argued defence mechanisms and other social influences create distortions between what he termed an individual's 'ideal self' (i.e. who they would like to be), and their 'self-concept' (i.e. how they presently see themselves). As such, this disparity between the current and the ideal, detracts from the individual's instinctive motivation to 'self-actualise' (Rogers, 1989). Furthermore,

central to Rogers's theory of motivation is that all people are intrinsically future oriented beings, primarily motivated by a need to fulfil their potential and operate innately according to what he termed self-actualising tendencies. Here it is suggested that such tendencies lead individuals to strive towards adherence of both biological needs (such as, food and reproduction), as well as psychological needs (such as, satisfaction and achievement), in order to progress and fulfil their individual potential (Rogers, 1967). Rogers believed tendencies to achieve self-actualisation to be the most important, yet fundamentally basic feature that motivates all human functioning (Rogers, 1967). Whilst such a Rogerian position has since developed somewhat within humanistic psychology (see Cooper, 2013 and Laas, 2006, for a review), the fundamental difference in positions between that of psychodynamic psychology, remains comparably similar. Therefore, whilst the Humanistic approach offers a useful explanation for positive motivators underlying certain personality features, including ambition and competitiveness, critics have argued the explanation as a whole fails to adequately account for seemingly self-destructive actions individuals may undertake. Thus, the theory lacks value in many real world applied settings, notably, in accounting for criminal behaviour whereby acts appear motivated by desire for revenge (Kivivuori, Savolainen, & Aaltonen, 2016; Sherretts et al., 2017; Willmott & Ioannou, 2017) or where distorted cognitions appear to compound the notion that motivations are driven by the individuals need to fulfil their potential, such as violence perpetration (Dardis, Dixon, Edwards & Turchik, 2015; Debowska & Boduszek, 2016; Debowska et al., 2017).

Additionally, Rogers also proposed the notion of *organismic beings* constructing different perceptions of the self. Organismic beings relate to the general assumption that all individuals have inherent tendencies for growth and development (Rogers, Kirschenbaum, & Henderson, 1989). Moreover, the 'ideal self' is suggested to be the true organismic beings' view of who they wish be and something which all individuals are capable of achieving. However, this is

only considered attainable when circumstances are favourable and actualising tendencies are not blocked by external factors (Ford, 1991). Unfavourable conditions and blocks lead to the development of what is termed a 'self-concept' (Rogers, 1989). The self-concept is affected by a lack of unconditional positive regard whereby praise and acceptance are obtained from others, without conditions being attached to such (Ford, 1991; Maltby et al, 2010). Yet Rogers suggested this to be something that rarely occurs resulting from inconsistencies between self-actualising behaviour and societal expectations (Rogers, 1989). Resultantly, individuals learn and internalise the social expectations necessary to obtain such positive regard, and become less accepting and more judgemental of themselves in order to meet these social requirements (Rogers, 1989).

Rogers termed such internalisations, conditions of worth and suggested that the human need for positive regard along with adherence to social expectations, typically leads to the shaping of a self-concept, distorted and incongruent from that of the real self (Rogers, Kirschenbaum, & Henderson, 1989). Accordingly, human motivations become directed towards the satisfaction of others expectations, thereby seemingly accounting for self-defeating behaviours individuals at times engage in (Nye, 2000). As such, in contrast with Freud's notion that sufficient gratification of desires will prevent individual fixation within the differing psychosexual stages, Rogers suggested the creation of a suitable environment where few restrictions to actualising tendencies exist, will allow the organismic being to realise and fulfil their potential throughout the life-course. Although Rogers Humanistic theorising has been widely adopted within therapeutic settings in an attempt to tackle self-defeating features thought to underlie certain personality types, as well as within the corporate world centred upon those thought to be suffering from a general lack of self-worth (Baldwin, 2013), his notion of self-actualisation is not without criticism. Leonard Geller's own endeavours to understand motivation led him to conclude self-actualisation to be "false, incoherent and unworkable in

practice” (Geller, 1982:1), again highlighting a potential lack of applied value. Geller stated the innate need for the ‘ideal-self’, which exists independently of social influence, to be a premise highly ideological in nature and lacking any convincing scientific support. A perspective others have appeared to agree with (Cooper, 2002; Geller, 1984; Mittelman, 1991; Neher, 1991; Pervin, 2003). Nonetheless, whilst both explanations of human motivation are undoubtedly complex and highly speculative in nature, attempts to empirically evidence the underlying concepts therein have generated much interest within scientific literature ever since.

### **Empirical Support for Competing Explanations**

The need to empirically validate the theoretical underpinnings of both Freud and Rogers’s conceptualisations of motivation, whilst apparent, have been somewhat more complex in practice. One of the major difficulties researchers encounter is the operationalising of abstract constructs and innate drives central to both theories. Rogers himself acknowledged this difficulty in attempting to devise a measure of the self-concept – termed the Q-sort questionnaire (Rogers, Kirschenbaum, & Henderson, 1989). This self-report measure and technique designed to measure the degree to which an individual’s self-concept may be considered congruent with their ideal-self, has been widely adopted within therapeutic settings (Ramlo, 2016). Likewise, organisations worldwide have made use of the Q-sort procedure in their attempt to capture whether prospective employees exhibit the congruence Rogers deemed necessary to flourish in life and thus their business (Crossan et al., 2017). As such, some have argued that widespread use of the technique within clinical and occupational settings can be considered to be evidence in itself, supporting Rogers’s conceptualisations of motivation (Nye, 2000). However more typically contemporary researchers conclude that the use of such measures and techniques offer little by way of scientific evidence. Attention is drawn back to the empirical support underpinning the onset of such constructs, which despite widespread

usage between disciplines and over time, remain lacking. Kampen and Tamás (2014) recently concluded that the paucity of such empirical support renders use of Q-sort procedures inappropriate and subjective at best. Despite this, the empirical exploration of Humanistic psychological constructs such as motivation and self-actualisation have attained plentiful support over time. Studies have reported evidence of the underlying structure of a motivational hierarchical need system (Mathes & Edwards, 1978), which in turn has stimulated further attempts to measure and unify understanding of such structures today (see Cooper, 2013).

Attempts have also been made to operationalize central Freudian concepts including; unconscious desires said to be important for; motivating individual behaviour (Erdelyi, 1984; Patton, 1992), defence mechanisms (Newman et al, 1997; Myers, 2000), and supposed behavioural regulators such as the ego (Loevinger & Wessler, 1970). Again, whilst the aforementioned research reported findings appearing to support the validity of such concepts and led many authors to conclude that empirical evidence of Freudian concepts thereby exists, others have reached more defensible conclusions. Cooper (2002) points out that as many of the concepts within both theories are not easily operationalized and remain difficult to subject to empirical scrutiny, ensuring that research methodologies effectively and accurately measure the proposed motivational concepts, remain difficult to ascertain. Elements of both theories can arguably account for any behavioural outcome in terms of fluctuating power balances between instinctual energy or the result of alternating restrictions placed upon an individual's actualising tendencies. However, empirical support for the exact conditions under which variations take place, remain absent from the literature. Therefore, alongside an apparent inability to falsify theories, there also seems to be an inability to effectively and empirically validate the central concepts therein. Resultantly, the extent to which both theoretical explanations of motivation can be considered verifiable, remains difficult to establish. Adopting Hjelle and Ziegler's (1981) categories for testing theories, both Freud's and Rogers's

concepts can be assessed in terms of their strength as explanations of personality. In pursuit of such, both Freudian and Rogerian accounts of personality and motivation derived from conclusions drawn from clients in receipt of therapy. Both theorists are known to have pertained their conclusions to constitute evidence in support of particular concepts they put forward (Nye, 2000). However, the notion of generating psychological explanations of typical human functioning and behaviour, based upon conclusions drawn within clinical treatment of abnormal functioning is arguably somewhat problematic.

Consequently, a move towards theories that contain operational constructs such as self-determination theory (SDT), subjected to extensive empirical testing, have become more common (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Stenius, Hankonen, Ravaja & Haukkala, 2016). Explanations that arguably address the need for a theory to have purpose, by helping improve our actions in the world (Lynham, 2002). The underlying assumption of SDT is that an individual has an innate tendency to be constructive and collaborative and thus motivated to take action. Notably however, alongside this the social context in which an individual functions within is seen to play an important role in either facilitating or hindering such tendencies. Advocates of SDT, an approach that has clear underpinnings of both psychoanalytic and humanistic thought, highlight that a fundamental benefit of the approach exists in its allowance for conditions under which an individual's natural activity and constructiveness will be facilitated or diminished (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This is something that as a result of the shortcomings surrounding verifiability, both Freud and Rodger's traditional explanations are seemingly less able to do. Nonetheless, both perspectives have clearly had a major impact on the understanding of human motivation, development of theorising in the discipline, and continue to underpin a wide range of approaches and therapies to this day – though questionably.

## Conclusion

Through contemporary assessment, two core and traditional explanations within psychology, applied here to human motivation, have been reviewed and assessed regarding their impact both historically and today. Each approach has its merits alongside disadvantages which have been discussed through a critical consideration of each perspective and the concepts therein. Freud's Psychoanalytic theory (1929) places innate drives that seek gratification at the centre of human motivation. Alternatively, the role of innate tendencies upon motivation from Roger's (1989) Humanistic conceptualisation of such, included greater consideration for the uniqueness of an individual's experience and the way in which humans perceive experiences than Freud's explanation. Further, Rogers suggests that innate drives alone are not enough to explain motivation, instead the need for an individual to fulfil their actualising tendencies and attain status of the person they wish to be, is the fundamental function underpinning human motivation. Yet one of the greatest criticisms of both perspectives surrounds the lack of verifiability, operationalization, and consequently empirical evidence that can be used to inform not only understanding, but evidence-based motivation building strategies. Although evidence suggests humanistic psychology appears to have developed and enhanced most, forming a more defensible position, one in which see's application of theories therein more readily supported and used throughout the world. The motivations that underpin wide-ranging human behaviour continues to generate interest from the scientific community, involved in almost all psychological research endeavours. Whilst it is clear that the two main positions discussed here have had an important impact upon the understanding of motivation, recent attempts to move towards theory building that can stipulate under what conditions behaviour can be manipulated, has led to theories which are therefore more open to empirical testing and scientific scrutiny.

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