

PSYCHOLOGY

Student's name

Institution

Personality psychology

Personality is the sum total of an individual's characteristics that defines that particular individual. These characteristics influence an individual's behaviors, emotions and cognition. They determine an individual's reaction to a given stimulus or environment (Larsen & Buss, 2013). Personality traits or characteristics also influence an individual's reaction to other individuals and determines one's attitudes, ambitions and values. They also determine an individual's perception of the different concepts within that individual's environment. The traits accord to an individual his or her uniqueness considering that different persons behave differently even under similar or different circumstances.

There are various theories that attempt to explain the different aspects of traits exhibited by different individuals. Some theories propose that the exhibited traits emerge from within the individual while some are of the opinion that the environment in which an individual resides determines or influences that individual personality. Others assert that personality traits are inherited from an individual's parents. The different theories have their weaknesses and strengths depending on the aspects being studied of an individual person in relation to that particular person's environment.

Case study: Mohammed Ali (Cassius Clay)

This paper shall examine Mohammed Ali who was born Cassius Marcellus Clay, Jr. He was a popular, famous and controversial American Heavy Weight Professional Boxer. Born on the 17th of January 1942 Ali is considered the best heavy weight boxer in the sport's history (Edmonds, 2006). He is also regarded as one of the most famous sports personality of the century. Sports Illustrated magazine recognized him as the "sports man of the century" in 1999 and the British Broadcasting Corporation announced him as the sports personality of the century.

Ali was not only influential and controversial in the boxing ring, but was also an ardent activist. He exemplified his values, ideas and thoughts in the social and political aspects of his society. He also expressed freely and publicly his ideas and thoughts on religion.

Mohammed Ali or rather Cassius Marcellus Clay Jr. was born in Kentucky specifically in Louisville. He was the first born son of Odessa and Cassius Clay Senior. As a young boy, Ali was extremely assertive and aggressive. His mother Odessa Clay described Ali as an unusual child. He tried really hard at everything he put himself to do. At a tender age of 10 months, Ali had already begun speaking after persistent attempts. He never stopped talking since then. At two years old, he was trying and insisting to feed himself. Ali also had a habit of drawing clothes from his drawer and leaving them sprawling on the floor. He was very outgoing and never used to play with toys; rather, he would go tree climbing and other physical activities. He also preferred playing with elder children and even then, wanted to be on the forefront. Ali portrayed some leadership qualities and an outgoing spirit at a very young age. He always wanted to be on the limelight and was also extremely protective of his ideals. For instance, he never allowed his mother to whip his younger brother Rudolph. Whenever the mother tried doing so, Ali would assertively and authoritatively push his mother way and warn her to desist from hitting his “baby”, as he referred to his younger brother (Edmonds, 2006).

Ali was introduced to boxing not because he was interested in the sport, but rather as direct consequence of an unfortunate event that occurred in 1954. Ali and his friend had visited the Columbia Auditorium when his bike was stolen. Ali was infuriated and went to report the matter to the Louisville police department. Ali and his friend reported the theft to Joe martin who doubled up as a police man and a boxing coach. Ali infuriatingly affirmed to Martin that he who would “whup” up whoever had stolen his bike. Martin advised him to train boxing first in order

to be in a position to do so (Edmonds, 2006). He went ahead and joined a boxing club where he got encouraged by his win in his first match and went on to win coveted titles in Kentucky. He also won an Olympic gold medal and a world title at still under 20 years.

Ali, influenced by the renowned civil rights activists and Muslim minister Malcolm X, renounced his Baptist upbringing and joined the Nation of Islam. He converted to Islam and changed his name from Cassius Clay to Mohammed Ali. It is also during this period that he became a professional boxer and civil rights activist at the same time. He was known at issuing statements unrelated to boxing, lashing out at the government or institutions that he considered violating his ideals and those of the society he lived in. He could also lash out at his opponents before his fights, abusing and belittling them.

He talked and aired his views consistently and assertively. He was never afraid to speak his mind to whoever he wanted to speak it to, even the government. For instance, in 1967, Ali refused to join the military to support the ongoing war efforts in Vietnam (Edmonds, 2006). He asserted that his religion could not allow him to kill innocent people. He was subsequently stripped off his boxing titles and his boxing license revoked for draft evasion. This ruling was however overturned by the Supreme Court.

Personality theories in relation to Ali

There are several personality theories that can be use to define an individual like Mohammed Ali. They are categorized into traits, psychoanalytic, behavioral and humanist theories. Trait theories focus on the internal characteristics and rely on genetics. Psychoanalytic theories focus on the development of an individual from childhood. The theory focuses on the unconscious aspects that determine an individual's behavior from childhood. Behavioral theories focus on the interaction of an individual with his or her environment that shape an individual's

personality. Humanist theories focus on human freedom and the capacity of an individual to shape his or her personality irrespective of his or her external environment.

Psychoanalytic Theory

This theory was propagated by Sigmund Freud, a famous psychoanalyst from Switzerland. Freud asserts that an individual's personality develops during childhood in a series driven by the pleasure seeking energy he refers to as the id. He refers this as a psychosexual energy that determines the behavior of a child and establishes the personality of an individual at an early age of about five years old (Ryckman, 2008). The behavior exhibited at this early age and the experiences influences an individual's personality and behavior late in life. Mohammed Ali is said to be an aggressive and assertive child from the age of two. His mother claims that he could insist on feeding himself and always wanted to do things his own way. He also exhibited an aggressive behavior in the manner in which he related with his peers. He preferred playing with older children than him and always insisted on being on the lead. His behavior as an adult especially in his boxing and activism can be attributed to his behavior as a child. Freud says that an individual personality is evident by the age of five (Hiriyappa, 2012). Ali confirms this assertion in the manner in which he used to behave in his adult hood. It is clear that Ali's aggressive personality developed at a very young age.

However, Ali's behavior as a child also disputes this theory. According to Freud, the series of behavioral development must be complete in order to have a complete personality (Rider & Sigelman, 2005). Freud says that a person's personality may be interfered with if fixation occurs at a particular stage. For instance, if fixation occurs at the Oral stage, an individual will have dependency issues and will have an aggressive personality. That individual may also have a problem with eating, develop drinking, smoking and nail biting problems. This

is contrary to Mohammed Ali's personality. Ali is said to have been very independent and aggressive at the same time from a very early age, a personality that is evident in his later life. He also loved to eat and was an excellent orator. His aggressive behavior thus puts this stage into dispute since he never exhibited any other behavior apart from aggressiveness that is associated with fixation at the Oral stage.

Freud asserts in his theory that the male child is attracted to his mother while the female child is attracted to her father. Freud is correct to some extent. Ali's life was significantly influenced by his mother who brought them up as Baptists. He is quoted saying in reference to his mother that "... and there's no one who's been better to me my whole life."

Generally, Ali does not seem to follow the five stages of Freud's development. He exhibits behaviors in stages contrary to the stages in Freud's developmental series.

Trait Theory of personality

Trait theory focuses on individual characteristics that differentiate one individual from another (Hiriyappa, 2012). Gordon Allport categorizes traits into three groups: cardinal, central and secondary traits. According to Allport, cardinal traits dominate an individual's entire life. An individual can be ascribed a single character based on his or her life time character. He says that these traits developed at later stages in life. Examples of individuals who exemplified such traits included Jesus Christ, Nichollo Machiavelli and Sigmund Freud among others, hence the terms like Christ like, Machiavellian and Freudian.

Though Mohammed Ali's character does not have a coined term, he so much exhibited cardinal traits throughout his boxing career. Ali was arrogant, proud and excessively dominative. He is known to taunt his opponents before any boxing match and he usually talked in all press conferences, a role supposed to be taken by a manager or coach. In a particular fight with Sonny

Liston, he described Liston as a big ugly bear, that even smelled like a bear and that he (Mohammad Ali) would donate Liston to a zoo after beating him.

Ali was an extraordinarily strong character. He was never afraid of any boxer irrespective of the boxer's status. In the match against Liston, who was the defending heavy weight champion in 1964, Ali's chances of winning were an improbable 7-1 in favor of Liston. Despite this, Ali still taunted Liston telling him that someone was going to die at the ring side. Ali's heart rate was excessively high at 120 more than double his normal of 54. People thought that Ali was afraid of Liston but he proved everyone wrong in the ring where he mercilessly beat Liston (Edmonds, 2006). This trait dominated his entire career even in the matches he lost.

A different dimension or perspective of the trait theory was propagated by the British psychologist Hans Eysenck. According to Eysenck, individuals can be categorized into three universal groups. These groups are Introversion/Extraversion, Neuroticism/Emotional Stability and Psychoticism. An individual portraying introversion traits is reserved and quiet, while an individual portraying extraversion traits is outgoing and talkative. A neurotic individual is easily upset while an individual with stability controls his or her anger. A psychotic individual finds it hard to accept reality. Such individuals live in fantasy, are hostile and antisocial (Hiriyappa, 2012).

Relating this theory to Mohammad Ali, he portrays extraversion and neurotic traits. Ali was extremely outgoing and very talkative. He talked just about any issue that annoyed or interested him. He was neurotic considering his temper on and off the boxing ring.

The big five personality dimensions theory suggests that individuals' personalities should be defined using five main personality traits. The theory was derived from revising and integrating Gordon Allport's, Raymond Cattell's and Hans Eysenck's theories. Researchers

suggested five main personality traits though there are still in contention. The five traits include extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism and openness. The traits are measured on a range between two extremes. Individuals portray most if not all of the traits but in varying intensities along the continuum (Ryckman, 2008).

Ali was an extreme extrovert. He portrayed a very strong sense of assertiveness and was also extremely emotional. At the end of his match against Liston, Ali is quoted saying “eat your words” “I shook the world” “I must be the greatest”. In another match with Ernie Terrell, Ali was angered by Terrell insistence of referring to him as Cassius instead of his Islam name Ali in pre-match interviews. He considered his Christian name as a representation of slavery which he hated. He vowed to Punish Terrell to acknowledge his Islam name. During the match, Ali kept shouting to Terrell saying; “What’s my name, Uncle Tom... What’s my name?” This shows just how emotional and assertive he was. To him, boxing was more than a sport. It was a means of expressing himself (Edmonds, 2006).

He was also agreeable to some extent. As a child, he was extremely protective of his younger brother Rudolph. He even prevented his mother from beating Rudolph. He also cared for the well being of his family. He never exposed his domestic problems and always sought to have his family stick together. He once flew back to his home to prevent his mother and father from divorcing.

Mohammad Ali was also conscientious. This is evident of his success in his boxing career. He trained very hard and was focused to winning titles. He feared no one and believed himself to be the greatest ever. He even referred to himself as such. Whenever he put his mind and efforts on anything, he would do it with passion and dedication. His mother described him as an unusual child.

Ali was neurotic. He was easily irritated. He intentionally avoided knocking Liston down just to punish him for refusing to acknowledge him as Mohammad Ali. He was always abusing other boxers and anyone else who deferred with his views. At one particular boxing interview, he became so agitated that he lashed harsh words at Joe Frazier, which forced Frazier to react violently.

He was also open and very imaginative as well as insightful. He was not easily compelled to join or support ideas without a critical analysis of the issues involved. He always did things with a valid reason and an unrelenting resolve. Ali refused to get drafted in the military saying that the Vietcong was not his enemy, that his enemies were the white supremacist who denied him and other black people basic rights in the United States.

Behavioral Theory

This theory proposes that an individual's environment influences his or her personality. Proponents of this school of thought observe and record human behavior and relate the behavior to the individual's environment. According to Ivan Pavlov who came up with classical conditioning theory, learning is largely influenced by the environment. Behavior can be shaped and determined through rewards or punishment. He downplays the effect of internal mental states. This theory disregards personal thoughts, emotions or even feelings. Personality and behavior is solely determined by the environment (Ryckman, 2008).

While this school of thought can explain Mohammed Ali's life to some extent, it is largely inconclusive. Mohammad Ali's father was assertive and aggressive, but Ali's life was to a large extent influenced by her mother who was calm and a kind church woman. Ali on the other hand portrayed both compassion and aggressive tendencies. Ali's family is described as assertive as a whole apart from a few individuals. Ali's life especially his adult life was shaped

and determined by his own thoughts, ideas, emotions and feelings. His hatred towards white people though was determined by the kind of environment he lived in. Ali experienced the pangs of racism at one point being denied service at a whites' only hotel just after he had won the Olympic Gold medal. Ali's assertiveness trait that dominated his character was however self driven than conditioned by the environment he lived in.

Considering the theories analyzed it is evident that the personality of an individual is extremely complex to be defined by a single theory. The big five traits theory is among the best among the many put forth due to its objectivity and broadness. The theory incorporates various aspects of the human person. It however fails to consider the external forces that influence an individual.

An individual might be an extrovert but choose to be quiet based on that individual's environment. Freud's psychoanalysis theory of the five stages of development is to a large extent very subjective. Human beings are too complex to be defined in five successive stages. Environmental factors are also ignored in this theory. There are many individuals who exhibit different behavior contrary to their childhood behavior due to their life experiences. Psychological researchers are however still carrying out intensive research to determine the basic scientific theory that can be used to define human personality. At the moment, the field remains open to analysis and disputes and confirmation of the existing schools of thoughts.

References

- Edmonds, A. O. (2006). *Muhammad Ali: A biography*. Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Hiriyappa, B. (2012). *Development of personality and its theories*. Bloomington: Booktango.
- Larsen, R. & Buss, D. (2013). *Personality psychology: Domains of knowledge about human nature*. New York: McGraw-Hill Education.
- Rider, E. A. & Sigelman, C.K. (2005). *Life-span human development*. Stamford: Cengage Learning.
- Ryckman, M. R. (2008). *Theories of personality*. Stamford: Cengage Learning.
- Weiten, W. (2010). *Psychology: Themes and variations: Themes and variations*. Stamford: Cengage Learning.