

THE SCIENCE OF PERSONALITY: NOMOTHETIC!

H. J. EYSENCK

Institute of Psychiatry, Maudsley Hospital

The cleavage (or perhaps cleft would be a less emotionally charged term) between the nomothetic and idiographic approaches to the study of personality is indeed, as Beck (2) has pointed out in his recent paper on this subject, "a principal and vigorously debated issue before psychology today." It follows that any serious attempt to reconcile and integrate these two opposing views should be given a sympathetic hearing, and should be attentively studied by all concerned with the concept of personality. Careful perusal of Beck's proposals, however, has brought to light what appear to this writer to be a number of fallacies that appear to make his attempt at reconciliation less appealing than it might appear at first sight.

First, let us be clear about the meaning of the words used. As is well known, they were introduced by the philosopher Windelband (14) as yet another set of terms to distinguish the *naturwissenschaftliche* (scientific, nomothetic) way of studying psychology from the *geisteswissenschaftliche* (humanistic, idiographic) manner. Allport (1) was one of the first to bring the concepts into use in Anglo-American psychology, and his exposition clearly indicates the meaning attaching to the words "nomothetic" and "idiographic." "The former [sciences] . . . seek only general laws and employ only those procedures admitted by the exact sciences. . . . The idiographic sciences, such as history, biography, and literature, on the other hand, endeavor to understand some *particular* event in nature or in society." This quotation makes it clear how difficult it would be to reconcile these two points of view; literature, even if called a "science" by

Allport (it would be interesting to know the justification for this curious appellation, probably equally repugnant to writers as to scientists), does not lie down easily with psychometrics. Beck has cut the Gordian knot by disowning "idiography" completely, and by rechristening a part of the nomothetic field "idiographic." A brief quotation from his paper will substantiate this argument.

. . . let it be noted that, so far as concerns the basic procedures of scientific method, the two methods have everything in common. They both have recourse to observation and to experiment. They analyze and resynthesize data. They draw inferences that follow the usual canons of logic, both inductive and deductive. These are the foundational approaches to scientific method (2, p. 253).

This is certainly an appealing picture, but it bears no relation to Windelband's or Allport's definition of these terms. Beck has in effect surrendered the castle of idiographic beliefs; he has given up the basic proposition that idiographic procedures are founded on the view that what he calls the "basic procedures of scientific method" are inapplicable to personality research.

Having thus emptied the term of its usual, and very useful, meaning, he invests it with an entirely new content. Quite arbitrarily, Beck divides the customary type of nomothetic research into two separate steps, one of which he calls nomothetic, the other idiographic. As far as can be deduced from his paper, it would appear that the measurement of isolated traits, such as bravery, or pride, or sense of humor, is to be regarded as nomothetic; it becomes idiographic when we "ask about any person how much bravery does he have, *and*

coolness, *and* pride, *and* sense of humor, *and* other variables that fuse into character" (2, p. 253). Nothing here of the complete and total rejection of such nomothetic concepts as traits, which is the main characteristic of the traditional idiographic attitude; instead, we find that when we study traits in combination, we are no longer doing nomothetic research, but idiographic! Having throughout his professional life studied traits in combination, having always paid particular attention to the ways in which they interact, modify each other, and, through their interaction, "[bring] about the total behavior which we identify as a particular personality" (2, p. 254), the present writer notes with surprise that instead of being a hard-bitten nomothetical psychologist, he has in fact always acted on idiographic principles. The reader may recall Molière's *Monsieur Jourdain*, who discovered late in life that he had always been speaking prose!

Bewilderment becomes complete when we hear that factor analysis is recommended as a favorite method of this "new look" idiography. According to Beck: "A universe of traits, variables in mutual interplay, affecting one another, these are the individual. This is the task which the idiographic method undertakes. The specific technique devised to test out the findings in this kind of universe is that associated with Stephenson—the *Q* technique" (2, p. 358). Beck is apparently referring to the method of intercorrelating persons, introduced by Thomson and Bailes (13), and factor-analyzing the resulting matrix of intercorrelations, introduced by Beebe-Center (3). (Others who have some claim to have introduced this method are Burt [4, 5], Thomson [12], and Stern [11].) This gives us a specific example to illustrate our contention that Beck's "idiography" is nothing but the old-fashioned nomo-

thetic method dressed up in slightly different clothing.

By giving preference to the method of "correlating persons" over the usual method of "correlating tests," and by implying that the former is better suited to the demands of personality research, Beck is clearly adopting the view that these two procedures give different results. It is obvious that if results of two methods are identical, or convertible into one another by some simple mathematical formula, then it is not possible to describe the one as "the specific technique" for testing hypotheses of a certain kind as contrasted with the other. Now Burt (6) and Cattell (7) have discussed this question of convertibility in detail, and there appears to be no doubt that, statistically, factors derived from the intercorrelations between persons (*Q* technique) are transposable from factors derived from intercorrelations between tests (*R* technique). As Cattell (7) points out:

The belief of some users of *Q* technique that it is fundamentally different from its transpose technique—*R*—and, indeed, a method *sui generis*, has so far been most exhaustively statistically examined and refuted by Sir Cyril Burt. . . . In the writer's experience professional statisticians take the position that there is no doubt about the transposability of factors from a double-centered score matrix though there may be doubt about the exact relation under other and special conditions. . . . *R* and *Q* techniques normally . . . (i.e. without double centering) have the completeness of their transposability slightly restricted by some inevitable mutual losses of information. The losses which then occur are (a) of the variance of the first factor (or in some conditions the first two) and (b) of the specific factors . . . (7, pp. 506-507).

The rest of Cattell's paper should be carefully studied to enable the relevance of this loss to be evaluated in relation to the question at issue; the conclusion the present writer has come to independently of Cattell's review (cf. 9) agrees completely with Cattell's assess-

ment, as well as with that of Burt, in considering the *Q* sort a very questionable procedure from the statistical point of view, which at best simply duplicates factors usually more easily and safely obtained by *R* technique. Beck nowhere answers the far-reaching criticisms made of *Q* technique, nor does he consider the identity of factors produced by analyzing a matrix or its transpose; in view of the practically unanimous verdict of those qualified to judge the statistical issues involved, we must conclude that the method favored by him produces, at best, factors also produced by the arch-nomothetic procedure of correlating tests, while at worst it is beset by so many statistical fallacies as to make results meaningless.

Beck refers to some results obtained by him with the use of this method; he says: "We have succeeded in . . . isolating six schizophrenic reaction patterns. That is, we are describing six patterns within this disease group that differ from one another" (2, p. 358). As he does not give any details, it is not possible to compare his patterns with those found along traditional lines by T. V. Moore (10), or by Wittenborn (15); given comparability of populations used, it may be predicted that there will be considerable similarity. Here again, it is difficult to see precisely what new contribution the *Q* method is supposed to make, or in what way the result is "idiographic"; method and aim alike are the stock in trade of the nomothetic psychologist. Having discussed the issues involved at length, with full experimental documentation, the writer may perhaps be allowed to refer the interested reader elsewhere (9). We may now state our conclusion. Beck has set out to reconcile and integrate the idiographic and nomothetic approaches. Instead of using these terms in their traditional sense, however, he has thrown

overboard completely the idiographic conception, and has instead rechristened part of the traditional nomothetic procedure as "idiographic." Renaming different approaches in this arbitrary fashion merely sows seeds of semantic confusion; it does not contribute to the *rapprochement* desired by Beck. The scientific and the literary views of personality are still as different and as opposed to each other as ever, and the only valid conclusion to be drawn from Beck's paper and his implicit withdrawal from the idiographic position is that suggested in the title of this article: *the science of personality must by its very nature be nomothetic*. This is the conclusion to which the writer was led after an extensive examination of the arguments and experiments adduced by many writers in this field (8), and Beck's contribution has strengthened, rather than weakened, belief in the essential correctness of this view.

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