

Books Reconsidered

Allport and *Personality*

A modern view

In the history of any scientific discipline, certain people stand out because they effectively defined the discipline, separated it from neighbouring specialities, and gave it a local habitation and a name. Three names stand out in the history (brief though it may be) of the scientific study of personality. The first is A. Heymans, a Dutch philosopher who almost single-handedly introduced the various theoretical, methodological and psychometric methods that characterise modern personality study (Eysenck, 1992). In the early years of this century, he put forward theories of specific personality dimensions, carried out rating studies on large numbers of subjects, correlated traits and devised a primitive method of factor analysis, derived factors that have stood the test of time (extraversion and neuroticism, to give them their modern names), and even went so far as to carry out psychological and physiological experiments to test deductions from these theories. As a reward for all this pioneering effort he is completely neglected in the modern literature; Hall *et al* (1985), in their *Introduction to Theories of Personality* gave much room to nonentities like Medard Boss, but make no mention of Heymans. He committed the ultimate crime of not being born in America, and must therefore be considered a non-person. Fortunately his theories and methodologies live on, largely in the London School.

The second person of profound historical importance is William Stern (1911), who wrote his influential *Differentielle Psychologie* around the same time as Heymans published his data (Eysenck, 1993a). To him belongs the credit of having named a special branch of psychology – ‘differential psychology’, or the study of personality and individual differences – and to have pulled together a platform of theories, methods, and results, and to have tried to knit all this together into a cogent framework. He clearly argued for an empirical and statistical approach, and for a clear-cut differentia-

tion from traditional experimental psychology. He, too, received his reward from Hall *et al* (1985) – complete omission. So much for the international nature of psychology!

The third is Gordon Allport, who has played an important part in the development of personality study by setting out a special field in American psychology, introducing and defining important concepts like *trait* and *attitude*, and considering in detail the nature and meaning of the concepts, assumptions and theories involved (Allport, 1967). With his great book, *Personality: A Psychological Interpretation* (Allport, 1937), personality study may be said to have come of age; from then on it has always had an important place in the teaching and study of psychology. I met Allport shortly after the war, and value him as a friend, although we differed sharply on fundamental points – he thought personality study should be idiographic (at least in part), I thought it should be nomothetic (*in toto*). But he never confused theoretical differences with personal antagonism, and we were always on the best of terms. Conversely, while opposed to idiographic approaches I wholeheartedly welcomed his general attitude to the scientific study of personality. He, above all, introduced the notion of *trait* and *attitude* as properly defined concepts into the study of personality, made clear their meaning, as well as their limitations, and postulated a hierarchical system of personality description which has proved valuable to this day.

Allport was above all fascinated by the uniqueness of the individual: “personality is the dynamic organization within the individual of those psychophysical systems that determine his unique adjustment to his environment”. Note the stress of the biosocial nature of man, implicit in the adjective “psychophysical”; his stress on *genetic* causes was almost unique at the time, when students of personality generally shared a 100% environmentalism. Personality, he thought, could best be described in

terms of traits: "a trait is . . . a neuropsychic structure having the capacity to render many stimuli functionally equivalent and to initiate and guide equivalent forms of adaptive and expressive behaviour". Note again the insistence on the neuropsychic nature of the structure; no other author at the time would have dared even to suggest the reductionism (at least partial) implicit in that adjective. Traits are inferred from "the repeated occurrence of acts that have the same significance following a definable range of stimuli having the same personal significance". Traits, he thought, are the outcome of combining two or more habits, i.e. very specific behaviours. Attitudes are intermediate between habits and traits; hence we have a hierarchical system with habits at the bottom, attitudes somewhere more general, and traits more general still. Type is the most general of all, based on the observed correlations between traits.

Throughout, Allport was concerned with motivation; traits act so as to act as motives for action. He dismissed unconscious motivation as relatively unimportant in non-morbid individuals, and generally opposed Freudian ideas; for him, the past was much less important than the present, and especially the future. Among the important theoretical concepts he introduced in this context was *functional autonomy*, i.e. the becoming an end in itself of an activity originally engaged in for other reasons. Most of us have to learn Latin, or calculus, because the school insists, but in some of us at least the activity becomes self-sustaining, and we continue because we enjoy it. This is a very important concept never assimilated properly by behavioural psychology.

Allport did not say that *all* personality research should be idiographic; nearly all of his own was nomothetic. What he did was to plead that idiographic research had a place in the armamentaria of several methodologies, and might complement the more widely used nomothetic methods. He distinguished two types of traits, according to the research approach involved. The nomothetic approach involves the same trait being studied according to the way it manifests itself in different people, or groups of people. The *idiographic* approach, in which interest is in a single person, involves studying that person's "unique patterned individuality". In idiographic research we let the data we collect about a given person determine the trait categories we apply to that person.

Perhaps I may illustrate the problem to which Allport responded with a personal example. In the happy pre-war days when I was playing tournament tennis (even occasionally winning such a

tournament!), my game was as one might expect from a stable introvert – non-impulsive, calculated, patient, going for percentages, working for the right moment to go for the point. When I went to a small English public school on the Isle of Wight for a time, I learned to play cricket. My game was explosive, trying to hit every ball for six, throwing caution to the wind, playing apparently very impulsively. How can a person be both impulsive and cautious? The answer is simple. Batting in cricket is a very unnatural activity. The way you hold the bat, the way you hit the ball, the way you defend – all are highly complex, difficult and unnatural movements. I knew I would not have time to perfect my game, or catch up with youngsters who had been coached in the 'correct' method for years. But I was big and strong, with excellent hand-eye co-ordination, so I could slog the ball with impunity, playing against the pretty poor bowling you get in school. I certainly got to the top of the batting order, much to the despair of the headmaster who saw all his good teaching and advice going out of the window! I was not being impulsive, as spectators would have imagined; I was simply planning my way of playing rationally, by taking into account my strengths and weaknesses, and the conditions prevailing at the time. Thus general measures of a trait may fail to take into account individual circumstances. The account of my behaviour would make idiographic sense, although nomothetically it might seem contradictory.

So far Allport is clearly justified. Indeed, when we discussed the problem he said: "Eysenck, when you come to write your autobiography, you will see that I am right!" Well, having written my autobiography (Eysenck, 1990) I can see his point much more clearly than I did back in 1949; individual constellations of traits and circumstances are difficult to account for only in terms of nomothetic traits. But the question remains of whether we can ever make this idiographic approach into a scientific methodology. By definition, science deals with the unique. Science attempts to bring order to the booming, buzzing confusion of everyday life; the unique necessarily falls outside that order. But it can define the unusual, and use it to explain events along nomothetic lines.

Consider the relationship between creativity and psychopathology. The evidence shows that psychopathology (schizophrenia, manic-depressive illness) destroys creativity; yet creative people very often demonstrate psychopathology (Eysenck, 1993*b*). A possible answer seems to lie in the very unusual combination of psychopathology and ego-strength. Normally, these variables correlate – 0.60. But if

we look at the scatter diagram, there are a few people who do not lie in the major quadrants (high psychopathology/low ego-strength, and low psychopathology/high ego-strength), but in the very much smaller high psychopathology/high ego-strength one. (Those with low psychopathology and low ego-strength are unlikely to come to our attention.) Thus the fairly unique behaviour of the creative person, the genius, may find an explanation in nomothetic terms, i.e. the unusual combination of distinct traits. (The theory in question is of course much more complex, but extends the same argument (Eysenck, 1993b).)

Perhaps we are wrong in looking at the nomothetic and idiographic approaches in an either/or, black and white fashion. It may be useful to think rather of a continuum. At the one extreme we have variables that can stand alone, and apply to (practically) all the people in our sample – IQ is a good example. In the middle of the continuum, we have combinations and traits, like psychopathology and ego-strength, some of which can be distinctly unusual. At the idiographic end you have quite unique constellations of traits and circumstances, like my adventures in cricket land. In chemistry, too, complex and unusual combinations of elements are difficult to predict as to what their effects might be – a whole industry of drug research has been built on the patient trying out thousands of minor variants of the same fundamental formula, without having given rise to many overarching scientific principles. The problem of consequences is not unique to psychology – consider chaos theory and the “butterfly effect”.

Along these lines, the unique may simply be the point of intersection of a large number of different nomothetic traits. There are some 340 000 discriminable colour experiences, each of which is absolutely unique, and distinguishable from any other. Yet, from the point of view of science, they can all be considered as points of intersection of three quantifiable variables, hue, tint and chroma. Just taking 100 traits and abilities, attitudes and habits, grading each on a ten-point scale, would result in more unique combinations than would be needed to characterise individually every one who lives now, or ever has lived! Indeed, “uniqueness” implies that a person is unlike any other – yet how can we decide that he *is* unlike anyone else, except by reference to nomothetic measuring instruments? To be *truly* unique means that it is impossible to decide that you are truly unique!

It is odd that Allport did not concern himself much with psychopathology, where if anywhere one would expect to find a fine breeding ground for idiographic observations. Of the two major sets of theories in that field – the humanistic/dynamic and the behavioural/cognitive – the former is more closely identified with the idiographic approach and treatment, the latter with the nomothetic. This is particularly true if the former is taken in its hermeneutic form, as is more and more the case. Fortunately we can test the truth of these theories in terms of the success of the treatments they give rise to, psychotherapy and behaviour therapy respectively, and several meta-analyses have given a fairly decisive answer. Grawe (1992) summarises three major meta-analyses to show that the mean effect size of behavioural/cognitive therapy is roughly twice that of dynamic/humanistic therapy, which is somewhat poorer than placebo treatment – and not superior to no treatment at all (Svartberg & Stiles, 1991). The expected superiority of idiographic methods in the abnormal field does not seem to have eventuated.

Whatever the final decision, Allport is one of the great figures in the history of personality study, combining rigour with originality, historical acumen with prophetic foresight. Heymans, Stern and Allport make up the troika that pulled the cart of personality research and theory out of the mud of philosophical and psychiatric speculation, into the highlands of scientific investigation. They were not always right, but they succeeded in laying down the lines of advancement which we are now following.

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