

8-15-2002

Personality and Psychobiography

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Recommended Citation

Editor, IBPP (2002) "Personality and Psychobiography," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*. Vol. 13 : Iss. 2 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol13/iss2/2>

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Title: Personality and Psychobiography

Author: Editor

Volume: 13

Issue: 2

Date: 2002-08-15

Keywords: Personality, Psychobiography

Abstract. This article describes Issues related to the construct of personality and the construct's application to understanding, predicting, and influencing people.

Think of it this way. One's perception could embrace one thing only or more than one thing at any moment in time. And that one thing could be everything, something, or nothing. As well, the more than one thing being perceived could be combinations of everythings, somethings, or nothings. The sky and beyond are the limits.

This rather abstract and, perhaps, abstruse introduction suggests that any individual person, some people, or all people could-some or all of the time-or could not-some or all of the time-perceive in such a manner that the kinds and numbers of perceptions might be quite different than how they generally are thought to be perceived. It might even be the case that there are people who perceive in a radically different fashion-e.g., a fashion wherein there is no construct of person, no construct of self versus other, no construct of them versus us. Such people, however, are either extremely proficient at acting as if they perceive like others believe that people perceive. Or, perhaps, people who believe that people perceive in a manner that is different from how some people perceive are unusually inadequate in perceiving that the latter sort of person perceives in such a manner. Here it is interesting to note that there could even be people who believe that people perceive in a particular manner and who concurrently hold the belief that people do not perceive in the same particular manner.

So, before we take the plunge and look at something called personality, we must at least realize that this something may be nothing more than a language convention corresponding to some intrapsychic content-a convention that may be, in turn, convenient, inconvenient, or inert as to seeming to understand and making our way in the world. And we must realize that as far as we are aware of ourselves and something outside of ourselves, the very notion that there is a person or people to whom something called personality would be applied is only one of many abstract notions-each even vying for perceptual prepotency and existential constitence.

Anyways, in the world of academic psychology-a world in which people are formally sanctioned by a society as having special competence even if they may not have such competence-and in the world of lay psychology-a world in which people are not formally sanctioned by a society as having special competence even if they have such competence-personality most often denotes something psychological that makes a person that person as opposed to some other person. Here psychology and psychological comprise thoughts, emotions, motivations, and behaviors.

Cognitive components of personality include not only what is thought but also how, when, and where thoughts occur. Sensation, perception, and fantasy also are examples of thought. Thought components also can be characterized by their types of logic, rationality, and association. It is even posited that thoughts can be unconscious which means that one can plausibly take credit for having all thoughts good and bad or, more narcissistically, for all thoughts one wants to have including those thoughts that one doesn't want to have but finds some sort of gain in owning up to having them.

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Emotional components of personality include what are commonly referred to as feelings, nothing more than feelings, in all their content dimensions from happy to sad to loving to hating. Emotional components also include the degree of arousal or quiescence and the lability of emotional content. And again emotions may be unconscious according to some academic and lay searchers of the psychological truth—a reality that, if real, renders one helpless against accusations of emotional betrayal and vacuity by our friends and enemies alike. In addition, there are even thoughts about emotions and their expression that either or both are good, or bad, or indifferent in and of themselves. Sometime, these thoughts even have gender-linked content so that emotional expression in males and in females is good or bad dependent on situation, society, culture, or specific magic moments.

Motivational components of personality include the purposes—sometimes labeled as goals—of the varying components of personality, including other motivations. Beyond the notion of unconscious motivations, there is a raging philosophical controversy is whether motivations are ultimately motivational—in other words, whether motivations are themselves the purposes and goals of human psychology or are mere expressions of human psychology without necessarily being constituted as purposes or goals or suggesting that there are any such things at all. To suggest that there may be no purposes and goals to life strikes such terror into many people that there is a research tradition in psychology labeled terror management that attempts to make predictions about aspects of human personality when the salience of confrontation with life as a meaningless and unpredictable void is increased. It may also be noted that it is politically incorrect in many academic circles to assume that life, history, and even individual people have a purpose, a goal, or even a coherent meaning. This is certainly a comforting thought in developing management strategies in organizations.

Behavioral components of personality include both external and internal acts—the latter even including the beating of the heart, covert kinesthetic movements, and neurotransmitter and hormonal secretion. There is at least one school of thought that behavior is the only thing that really matters when addressing personality—that the other aforementioned personality constituents are apocryphal remnants of thought (even if thought as an apocryphal remnant of thought is, well, thoughtless) or that the other alleged personality constituents are irrelevant to personality. There also are schools of thought that certain classes of personality are more important to personality than others. For example, there are those who believe that variants of biological or social substrates of personality are the be all and end all of understanding people. Often there is a very high positive correlation between the area of socially sanctioned expertise with which an academic is remunerated for services and the belief in a particular be all and end all.

Although the above four components commonly constitute something called personality, the question remains whether personality is a useful mode of thinking about people, whether it is only a useful mode of thinking about people, whether it has some ontological validity irrespective of being useful, or whether we are fated to enter the familiar philosophical conundrums of being a brain in a vat, outrunning the demon possibility of doubt, or of being unable to differentiate between being asleep and awake—the last a practical matter affecting many academics who lecture throughout the world.

To posit that personality pertains to something psychological that makes that person that person as opposed to someone else, personality theorists—whether our formally credentialed and socially sanctioned experts on personality or lay psychologists who comprise all people (and, indeed, this may

well include all people including the sanctioned experts) who employ a personality construct-usually mean the following. First, there is something about each person that is shared with all other people that makes each person a person, as opposed to someone or something else. Second, there is something about each person that is shared with some other people. Third, there is something about each person that is shared with no one else.

Now, one might assume that only what is shared with no one else qualifies as personality, in that personality pertains to what makes each person that person as opposed to someone else. However, what is shared with no one else is not only just the isolated aspects of uniqueness but also how what is shared with all others and some others are integrated or not completely integrated together and with those very aspects of uniqueness.

The fact remains, however, that personality may be but an example of language usage and associated cognition that is shared by members of a social population. Even the shared language usage may mask covert differences in associated cognitions among users of the personality construct. In fact, shared language usage and shared and different cognitions about something called personality may themselves constitute all of personality or at least an important aspect of it. Moreover, it may well be that the concatenation of cognitions about something called personality that characterizes various components of a social population exemplifies a false consciousness, awareness, or phenomenology. In this sense, what people believe about people encapsulated in the construct of personality bears no necessary correspondence to optimal utility in achieving people's purposes and goals-even if it seems to. What's more, the belief in personality may facilitate one's exploitation by other people with significant political, social, cultural, and economic power.

In any case, the denotation of personality as something psychological that makes that person that person as opposed to someone else has a number of other difficulties and complexities as well as that of its very utility and ontological validity.

Personality, Language, and Reality. Beyond the hypotheses of personality as a mere language construction and of personality's construction and constructed constituents as unique in meaning for each and every person is the additional difficulty of the compatibility of language and reality. Some people posit that language and reality are identical, in that reality is language dependent and can only be constructed and construed through language. Other people posit that language is as one with perception and is the tool one ultimately employs to seek some asymptotic approximation of reality. Still other people posit the identity of language and reality but that this reality mandates nothing necessarily about whether there is such a thing as reality or what this reality might be or might be like. Still others posit that the relationship between language and reality is unknowable because the infinite choices on some continuum running from holistically to atomistically constructing reality are devoid of valid criteria bearing on what to choose.

Language may be the only perspective outside of which one cannot escape to analyze. This existential fate-as with the enigma that nonsense is the only kind of sense one can sense-does not augur well for one embarked on a journey of enlightenment towards an endpoint of understanding, predicting, and influencing people.

Theories of Personality. Still a significant and hallowed research tradition in academic psychology is the construction of macro-theories of personality. Each constructor of a macro-theory purports to identify and expound upon that which is most salient in understanding what makes people people. Individuals

differences in people are explained as variations of the salient theme(s). Yet the chosen theme(s) may well suggest more about the constructor's personality including the constructor's personal beliefs about people masquerading as esteemed professional opinion than about the people to be described, explained, or understood. One often is left with the intuition that there are infinite variants of elements within a stream of consciousness or abstractions from such elements that could as well qualify for personality themes. Much as many readers of Finnegans Wake and even Ulysses are left with huge leaps to approximate the constructor's meanings, one may face various personality theories with huge leaps of faith still falling short of validating various constructors' themes.

Integrated Components. Related to the infinite choices on some continuum running from holistically to atomistic constructing reality are the four classes of personality components-viz., cognition, emotional, motivational, and behavioral. The four classes could as well be two or seven or ninety nine and a half. They can interrelate and be integrated in many different ways. Different classes of components and elements of these components also can differ in their significance and salience for different people in the context of all aspects of psychological functioning. Time- and cost-effective methods to assess all these differences for even one person-let alone many people-are probably not an option based on today's state-of-the-art research in academic psychology.

It is the very choice of seeking the truth that may be the culprit behind the fool's errand of integration of personality components. Perhaps all that can be done is offer up layers and layers of meaning that may or may not resonate with the reader and potential acolyte of a personality theory. In fact, one would still be left with an even more dire complexity: the confrontation of meanings from the constructor of personality theory and those from the many readers of such theory.

Personality as Interpersonal. Personality-beyond denoting what psychologically makes a person that person as opposed to some other-seems premised on a construct that is individual as opposed to social. In other words, personality is described as something possessed by a person, manifested by a person, and characterizing a person only in some acontextual living space-even if one is attempting to ascribe something social about an individual.

Yet, can any psychological aspect of a person be truly divorced from that person's interactions with others? Even when physically alone, a person is accompanied by other people in cognition, emotion, motivation, and behavior. Perhaps it is language that is the inadequate meaning constraining and interpersonal analysis. And this becomes even more of an issue when interpersonal is broadened as appropriate to encompass interobject wherein object includes one's perceptions.

Personality as Situational. To continue with the contextual nature of personality, one might well note that not only is personality intimately related to the interpersonal but also to the situational. And situational denotes not only the immediate physical, psychological, and social and cultural milieu but also long-term historical and even evolutionary trends.

Again, the notion of personality as something residing in the person is highly suspect, incomplete, and misleading. When attempting to understand, predict, and influence a person, one then becomes at the mercy of events beyond one's control and even beyond one's apprehension.

Personality as Conscious, Preconscious, and Unconscious. It may well be that awareness and personality intersect but are not completely contiguous. In other words, some of personality may be unknown to the person being characterized by that personality. Briefly, that of which a person is aware is conscious. That of which a person is not aware but can be relatively easily is preconscious. That of which a person is not aware and cannot be or can be only with very significant degrees of difficulty is unconscious.

It is this last that is most problematic. For how can one show that something psychological-especially intrapsychic-about a person that is unknown to that person can be known to someone else about that person? This question is complicated by at least two types of knowing. The first type denotes believing that one knows something, the latter actually knowing something whether one believes it or is aware of the belief or of what the belief is about. And if one can know something without being aware of it, one might end up with a social configuration of dueling experts about a person among that person and some formally credentialed or socially labeled experts on the one hand and anyone attempting to infer something psychological about a person on the other.

Perhaps it is the case that the unconscious is but a robust stalking horse for motives in others about oneself that are not unknown but are unspeakable. These motives would then have a power that recedes into nothingness once spoken of-much as so-called primitive and primeval beliefs about losing one's soul once one's words or physiognomy is captured on text or by photograph.

Personality as Inescapable. In fact, one might be puzzled over how the personality of one person can be assessed by another. The another also presumably can be characterized by a personality that makes that another another as opposed to the person being assessed by another. How can the another escape this personality to assess the person without that person serving only as a vehicle for the manifestation or expression of the another's personality? And when does consensus or divergence of the opinions of many others about a person bear mostly on the personalities of the others or on the person? This last point again bears on the competing meanings of constructors of personality theory and readers of theory who may nothing more than constructors of theory through their readings of theory.

Personality as Temporal and Quantitatively Ambiguous. The personality construct almost always is assumed to have temporal qualities. That is, aspects of personality may change with time irrespective of interpersonal and situational elements. Yet when personality is assessed not to have changed over some interval, does one assume that personality has, indeed, not changed? Or has the assessment technique or approach not picked up the change? And if personality is assessed to have changed, how does one differentiate change from an inaccurate measurement of two or more temporal states of personality that have actually remained constant?

In fact, the very constancy of measurement through time often is assumed to support the reliability and even the validity of a personality assessment instrument, while inconstancy is assumed to support neither! This bears on the contention of many academics touched by the still lively (in the United States) rubric of postmodernism that each person can be concurrently and through time characterized by multiple selves-a nightmare for and human resources or security manager in an organization.

Personality as Cross-Cultural. Concepts such as national character, ethnic character, ethnicity, racial profiling, and the like bear on the notion that there are group differences in personality that are much

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more significant than individual differences within a group. Yet one might note that each individual may be said to reside within an at least partially unique culture through at least partially unique sensory, cognitive, and interpretive processes. Added difficulty and complexity relates to similar personality assessment procedures being construed differently by different assessees and assessors-all of whom reside within at least partially unique cultures.

So the problem one is left with becomes how to traverse from the crude simplicity of cross-cultural psychology as the psychology of various artificially constructed groups-each based on skin color, geographical origins, ethnic practices, and so on-to the dynamically complex and rich cross-cultural psychology of various selves within, between, and among each person.

Personality as Non-Psychological via Non-Narration. In this discussion, although personality has been deemed psychological by definition, most professional notions of personality-be they macro-theories or particularistic, elemental depictions-severely constrain the psychology that is mined via a limited combination of methodological implements. Life stories and life histories as conceived and perceived by persons being assessed, self-valued life themes and occurrences, and other richly textured aspects of human awareness seem less significant for the personality constructions of the experts, more so for laypersons. This finding suggests an unfortunate set of narratives for formal and advanced psychological education and the application of so-called psychological knowledge.

A Conclusion. It thus appears that a psychobiography based on the personality construct has huge challenges. A political psychology informed by personality must be formed with care. (See Alexander, I.E. (1990). *Personology: Method and content in personality assessment and psychobiography*. Durham, NC, USA: Duke University Press; Elms, A.C. (1994). *Uncovering lives: The uneasy alliance of biography and psychology*. London: Oxford University Press; Runyan, W. (1997). *Studying lives: Psychobiography and the conceptual structure of personality psychology*. In R. Hogan & J. A. Johnson (Ed.). *Handbook of personality psychology*. (pp. 41-69). San Diego, CA, US: Academic Press, Inc; Sloan, T. (Ed.). (2001). *Critical psychology: Voices for change*. New York, NY, US: St Martin's Press, Inc.; Young-Bruehl, E. (1994). *A history of Freud's biographies*. In M. S. Micale & R. Porter (Eds.). *Discovering the history of psychiatry*. (pp. 157-173). New York: Oxford University Press. (Keywords: Personality, Psychobiography.)