

NATURAL HISTORY AND PHENOMENOLOGY

CHARLES A. DAILEY

Interstate Bakeries Corporation, Kansas City, Missouri

Every clinician is a practitioner of "natural history." Natural history depicts the struggle of organisms to adapt to their habitats, and it is the concern of every clinician to observe and record this struggle, for what it reveals about the patient's personality.

The clinician-naturalist makes and records his observations in terms of "cases," which are logically comparable to the biologist-naturalist's specimens. Thousands of clinician-naturalists collect such "specimens;" one would think that a science of personality might gradually emerge from this mass accumulation of fact.

Closer scrutiny, however, fails to bear out this optimism. We find that, although the clinical psychologist may be a naturalist in his day-to-day labors, he does not make his contributions to scientific journals in this manner. He sees his cases one at a time, reasons through their problems one at a time, but when he publishes his findings, he ceases to be an individual psychologist and becomes an experimentalist or statistician. Psychologists apparently believe that only groups of persons can tell us the truth about human nature. As a result, they write few and rather poor case studies, and in most psychological journals, natural history is not well represented.

J. P. Scott has pointed out that "psychology never enjoyed a great period of description and comparison" in the hands of naturalists or field observers, as did other sciences (14). Barker and Wright comment, in similar vein: "The descriptive, natural history, ecological phase of science which is so strongly represented in the biological sciences, sociology, anthropology, earth sciences, and astronomy has had virtually no counterpart in psychology" (15).

What can be done to create a natural history of persons?

We must, in the first place, be clear about what we mean by "natural history." Secondly, we must distinguish natural history from the closely related approach of phenomenology, and, thirdly, from the nomothetic longitudinal approaches of learning theory and Freudian psychoanalysis. We may thus indicate the kind of thought and research which would develop a useful, valid, and scientifically interesting natural history of persons.

WHAT IS NATURAL HISTORY?

The word natural history originally pertained to any science of the physical universe. As we are talking about a natural history of people, we are speaking of the traditions and methods of the great naturalists rather than of the substance of their studies.

We shall use the term natural history to refer to the science of the naturally occurring. In its simplest form, this science would involve statistical studies such as population change. In its more complex form—in which we are interested in this paper—the science would study the actions and relationships of organisms within their habitats.

A natural history of persons provides narrative descriptions of how persons behave in their normal contexts of living. A very complete natural history of a person would be a very full account of his life. In short, the natural history of persons has the following characteristics.

1. It asks questions about the way of life and growth of individuals, rather than about their abstract properties.
2. In answering such questions, it collects observations of individual behavior in natural situations, as opposed to situations specially contrived for measurement (laboratories, clinical testing, etc.). Much of naturalistic data-collection is unguided by hypothesis.
3. It rejects observations of behavior as unrealistic which are made in a historical vacuum—accurate natural history data must report fully the time and place of observation. This criterion distinguishes natural history from mere rumination over one's past experience.
4. It considers the individual validly observed only if he is related to his geographic, economic, political, and social context—in short, he must be observed in his habitat.
5. It regards the ideal research protocol as a narrative description of individual behavior. Numerical and other codifications of behavior are regarded as having secondary value.
6. It regards field study as yielding the most precise data because only in such data can the individual's behavior be seen in relationship to the contemporaneous and historical factors conditioning it.
7. In the study of personality, natural history utilizes life histories as its primary research instrument, as opposed to instruments yielding cross-sectional data such as tests and laboratory procedures.

As a consequence of these requirements, natural history data tend to be concrete and specific (1; 7, pp. 461ff.). They are unsuited for reductionistic explanation. They have the teeming richness of ordinary life, not the conceptual richness of theory. Where natural history data are barren, however, it is the barrenness of simplicity rather than the barrenness of abstraction.

SIMILARITIES TO PHENOMENOLOGY

It will be seen from the above that personality is regarded here as a dynamic, fluid process, and has no "cross section." However, almost all systematic thinking about personality has been cross sectional. We shall need to inquire: What are the possibilities of a history of persons? What traditions of the field of history itself might give guidance to us in forming a natural history of persons?

In pursuing this line of inquiry, the author made an unexpected finding: The philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey, who has some importance in the origin of phenomenology, also had something relevant to say about history. Dilthey sought to develop an epistemology of history which would be neither a part of speculative philosophy nor a poor relative of scientific empiricism. In order to do this, he proposed a phenomenological approach to psychology, and a logic which fits history.

Thus we find that Dilthey considered our problem some time ago, and emerged with a program of two parts: the one, much in vogue in psychology ever since, giving rise, according to Meyerhoff (12, pp. 17-18), to Gestalt psychology and to modern phenomenological psychology; the other, historical logic, not clearly recognized as a problem in psychology, and undeveloped in it.

There are a few exceptions to this neglect. Genetic psychology has been interested in the longitudinal patterns of growth in the early years of life, and one Gestalt psychologist, Angyal (2, particularly Chapt. 10), has treated the life span itself as a Gestalt. As another example, R. W. White has described *Lives in Progress* (15). But in the mainstream of academic thought, historical psychology does not exist.

At any rate, phenomenology and natural history (as we have defined it) have a common philosophical ancestor in Dilthey. We are encouraged to look for other parallels between these two methodologies.

Naturalistic observation. One recalls that Gestaltists criticized introspectionists for artificiality. The remedy was an approach to sen-

sory experimentation which would use the naive methods of common sense and in particular depend upon "the uncorrected kind of observation called phenomenology" (9, p. 364). From that position, it was a short step to emphasizing the importance of "natural forms" in perception, since people naturally see forms. An environment made up of isolated, elemental stimuli was replaced with an environment made up of "structured wholes," because that is the way people naturally seem to see.

Here we have a point of similarity between natural history and phenomenology: a naturalist is a common-sense observer, and his empathic and sensitive observation is what we must also have for phenomenological research.

In clinical psychology, Adler exemplifies this approach. "He emphasized the unprejudiced approach to the patient, and based his understanding on empathy. This he defined simply in the demand, 'We must be able to see with his eyes and listen with his ears'" (3, p. 14). Certainly such a clinical approach would be necessary to carry out the naturalist's aim of determining the situation of the subject.

Among recent clinicians, Carl Rogers has particularly exemplified the common ground of the phenomenologist and naturalist.

In a new field perhaps what is needed first is to steep oneself in the *events*, to approach the phenomena with as few preconceptions as possible, to take a naturalist's observational descriptive approach to these events, and to draw forth those low-level inferences which seem most native to the material itself (13).

Emphasis on inner structure instead of "causes". Another point of similarity, as already mentioned in the above, is suggested by the Gestalt emphasis upon structures. If much of experience in everyday life appears to us in structured form, then this is the way experience ought to be studied. Both phenomenological research and natural history share an interest in frequently occurring patterns of stimuli, or situations. Another way of saying this is to point out that both methodologies are interested in defining the situation of the individual.

Dilthey maintained that "causation" was a physical concept without place in historical logic, and that a "descriptive psychology" would be more useful than would an "explanatory psychology." The latter can lead to such excesses as explaining Napoleon's genius on the basis of his short stature; at best, it leads to a reductionism which is contrary to the aims of natural history.

Adler used the phenomenological method in searching his cases for the internal relationships which would reveal their meaning and pat-

tern. He viewed those relationships as tentative, saying, for example, that a patient behaved "*as if* he longed to prove his masculine superiority." In his use of the *as if* Adler was rejecting the 19th century physical concept of causation, and substituting for it the search for internal structures.

Thus, natural history and phenomenology share a common mistrust of attempts to explain data causally, and insist that it is more fundamental to portray the inner structure of data.

Summing up the similarities, we may say that both natural history and phenomenology owe a debt to Dilthey, who was interested both in a psychology of patterned processes and in the logic of history. Each approach insists upon making scientific observations in uncomplicated, natural ways. Each is interested in a science which can cope with everyday experience. In that natural history and phenomenology both search for the internal patterns of human behavior, they belong to the descriptive rather than the explanatory sciences.

DISTINCTIONS FROM PHENOMENOLOGY

The total situation. Natural history, as defined here, requires a phenomenological psychology. However, natural history reaches beyond the latter, striving to make an objective representation of total situations.

The "representative design" which Brunswik demanded (8) for research, takes account of the probabilities of the natural or normal habitat. We must therefore develop an ecological psychology before we can conduct laboratory research which can be generalized to everyday behavior. Contemporary psychology falls far short of recognizing the importance of Brunswik's program, and still further of carrying it out. It is even questionable that phenomenological psychologists have given adequate attention to its implications.

In clinical psychology, to take a good case history, one must be able to sympathize with the patient and write a good phenomenological description of his mood and attitude. But to complete the history, one must also inject material regarding the economic conditions in the patient's home town, for example.

While the lines quoted from Rogers above are almost a classic description of the naturalist's method, he is in fact closer to phenomenology than to natural history. For Rogers, in much of his work, appears to be more interested in the feelings and attitudes of the client than in the total objective situation.

In contrast, the following brief clinical note of Adler not only presents the patient's feeling, but places that feeling into the context of the home situation:

She had felt curtailed in her life with her family, and her husband was the first person who had treated her with overindulgence. But now his business obligations made it impossible for him to devote himself so much to her. She now wanted to be connected only with her husband and to exclude everyone else (3, 304).

Adler's case, short as it is, relates the patient to some aspects of her habitat. The structure of this case contains more than the patient's attitudes and feelings; it also includes, for example, some aspects of the husband's business.

Narrative description. A second distinction is in regard to the kind of description required. Natural history, applied to the study of personality, requires narrative description of life-long sequences of behavior, or life histories. Phenomenological description need not be narrative or biographic.

Life span. Third, phenomenological research deals with problems which are not primary problems for the naturalist—the nature of memory, perception, learning, etc. Natural history focusses on the life span of the individual, and upon the overall pattern of living he adopts to cope with the stresses and possibilities of his particular habitat.

The work of Barker and Wright and their colleagues (5, 6) might be cited as an outstanding example of the aims and problems of natural history. Their interest is in developing the psychological ecology formulated by Lewin (10). Their behavior data were recorded on the basis of direct observation of children in the actual context of their home in terms of natural units of behavior. In reporting on this work at a symposium on phenomenology, Barker, in a paper entitled "Structure of the stream of behavior," raised the question, illustrating the type of fundamental problem with which ecology comes to grips: "What are the parts and pieces of the behavior continuum, and how are they fitted together contemporaneously and sequentially" (6, 156)? By contrast, Barker pointed out, most of the units traditionally discriminated in the stream of behavior by experimenters are alien units; they are "marked off upon the behavior stream according to the preconceptions and purposes of the investigator, or they are actually created by him via experiments and clinical procedures" (6, p. 156).

Field study. Finally, it appears possible to conduct phenomenological research in the laboratory. But this is not as appropriate for natural history. Naturalistic investigations, by definition, are either field studies or employ methods designed to elicit evidence regarding events taking place in the natural environment or habitat.

The structured phenomenological experiment reported by Bakan (4) is a laboratory-centered research in learning, and thus not natural history in method or intent.

It might be useful to take a problem such as the assessment of personality, and see what new formulation of it might be made from the natural-history point of view.

Phenomenology pervades the modern clinical conception of assessment. Assessment is phenomenological if it: — seeks to define the situation of the subject, for example, his position in respect to his life goals and values as he sees them; — seeks to define the “self” as an important component of every situation; — seeks to make it possible for the clinician to view the world through the patient’s eyes, and in the frame of reference provided by the patient’s self-conception.

This, however, is not enough. Clinical assessment is apparently not very accurate, insofar as we know how to measure accuracy (11). Something more is demanded.

A natural-history approach to assessment would do many of the things which are now done. It would search for meaningful, understandable patterns in the person’s behavior. It would do this without attempting to “import” extraneous, abstract concepts to explain the behavior, such as “libido.” It would insist upon describing the person’s everyday life experiences and perceptions, and not confine itself to esoteric minutiae from his dreams and free associations. Nor would it utilize codifications, such as Rorschach scattergrams.

What is different about the naturalistic approach is that it conceives the person to be a *historical process*. He is not considered to “have” a personality, but only to have a history. “Personality” is the clinical summary of that history or, if you will, an inference based on that history.

Natural history is a tale told with reference to actual situations, or “events” taken from a life. In this tale, the person cannot be abstracted away from the physical, geographic, political, economic, or social context which is part of such events. They are part of him; he cannot be conceived apart from the situations in which he behaves; he is, in short, a historical and not an abstract fact.

In this scheme of thought, assessment becomes a technique of obtaining descriptions of the events making up a life, and of constructing from them a useful and valid clinical biography. To do this, the appraiser must be able to interpret the person's behavior in relation to its historical and cultural context.

COMPARISON WITH LEARNING THEORY AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

One might wonder about the distinctions between natural history and nomothetic approaches, like learning theory and Freudian psychoanalysis. Is it not curious that learning theory, with its stress upon biology and upon the sequential connections within behavior, has not generated a natural history of behavior? Is it not equally curious that psychoanalysis, with what appears to be a case-centered philosophy of research, has not developed a corps of great naturalists?

There are several reasons for these failures. First, both of these approaches remain woodenly attached to the 19th century model of science: they believe in, and therefore think in terms of, the "basic causes" of behavior. Second, they do not believe in, and therefore never really perceive, individual persons. Third, as a corollary to the first two beliefs or premises, these two approaches do not really acknowledge historical process as a primary problem, *per se*, for science. They both deal with longitudinal data, but lacking the conceptual tools to grasp their complexity, simplify them according to an abstract conceptual scheme, in the name of "theoretical interpretation." Instead of the rich fullness of history, longitudinal data for the learning theorist are schematized according to an *a priori* set of variables—stimulus, response, reinforcement, etc. Instead of the concrete, unique pattern of biography, each life history is for the psychoanalyst merely a new illustration of the dynamic relationships between the forces of the id and the mechanisms of the ego and the demands of the superego. Both learning theorist and psychoanalyst approach longitudinal data with a fairly rigid *a priori* model of man. Their idea of science is that one can hardly do otherwise.

The naturalist is interested in the findings and concepts of learning theory and psychoanalysis, and even may regard some of the relationships established by these approaches as useful first approximations in understanding behavior. He is, however, so sensitive to the rich complexities of man's behavior *in situ* that he cannot take very seriously these relationships; still less can he regard them as laws "governing" behavior.

The naturalist would regard progress in the understanding of personality as progressively more sensitive perception on the part of observers. Progress for the nomothetic scientist, in contrast, would consist of progressively better models of behavior.

Curiously enough, in spite of these divergent ideas of science, there is every reason to hope that a fruitful interchange might be developed between these methodologies, both in terms of concrete data and in terms of the challenges which they offer one another.

REFERENCES

1. ALLPORT, G. W. The use of personal documents in psychological science. *Soc. Sci. Res. Coun. Bull.*, 1942, No. 49.
2. ANGYAL, A. *Foundations for a science of personality*. New York: Commonwealth Fund, 1941.
3. ANSBACHER, H. L., & ANSBACHER, ROWENA R. (Eds.) *The Individual Psychology of Alfred Adler*. New York: Basic Books, 1956.
4. BAKAN, P. Structured phenomenology in the analysis of a learning situation. In *Proc. XVth intern. Congr. Psychol.* Amsterdam: North-Holland Publ. Co., 1959. Pp. 160-161.
5. BARKER, R. G., & WRIGHT, H. F. *Midwest and its children*. Evanston, Ill.: Row, Peterson, 1954.
6. BARKER, R. G. Structure of the stream of behavior. In *Proc. XVth intern. Congr. Psychol.* Amsterdam: North-Holland Publ. Co., 1959. Pp. 155-156.
7. BERRIEN, F. K. *Cases and comments on human relations*. New York: Harper, 1951.
8. BRUNSWIK, E. *Systematic and representative design of psychological experiments*. Berkeley: Univer. Calif. Press, 1949.
9. HEIDBREDER, EDNA. *Seven psychologies*. New York: Appleton-Century, 1933.
10. LEWIN, K. *Principles of topological psychology*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1936.
11. MEEHL, P. *Clinical vs. statistical prediction*. Minneapolis: Univer. Minnesota Press, 1954.
12. MEYERHOFF, H. (Ed.) *The philosophy of history in our time*. New York: Doubleday, 1959.
13. ROGERS, C. R. A process conception of psychotherapy. *Amer. Psychologist*, 1958, 13, 142-149.
14. SCOTT, J. P. The place of observation in biological and psychological science. *Amer. Psychologist*, 1955, 10, 53-60.
15. WHITE, R. W. *Lives in progress; a study of the natural growth of personality*. New York: Dryden, 1952.