

## ISSUES IN THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH TO PERSONALITY<sup>1</sup>

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In the psychology of personality, and in psychology as a whole, the work of recent years has made clear a fact of far-reaching significance—that behaviorism and its canons of scientific procedure have failed in what must be considered the primary task of psychology, the scientific reconstruction of the human person as we know him in ordinary life.

The grounds on which this conclusion is based can be gleaned piecemeal from a careful reading of the literature of the past five years. There is, for example, the dissatisfaction with simplistic models and the consequent transformation of ideas from biological to psychological in the realm of motivation (27). There is also the reconstruction which has taken place in the philosophy of science, in the liberalization of the operationism dogma and the shift from a verifiability criterion of meaning to the more permissive and fertile notion of confirmability (11). But nowhere does the warrant for this conclusion emerge as clearly and compellingly as in the 36 essays in Study I (the first three volumes) of Sigmund Koch's *Psychology: A Study of a Science*. In a remarkably penetrating epilogue, Koch, noting the "growing stress—both internal and extrinsic—against behaviorist epistemology" (18, p. 768), concludes that "*the results of Study I set up a vast attrition against virtually all elements of the Age of Theory code*" (18, p. 783). Koch goes further to emphasize the resulting theoretical openness of the contemporary psychological scene:

*For the first time in its history, psychology seems ready—or almost ready—to assess its goals and instrumentalities with primary reference to its own indigenous problems. . . . The more adventurous ranges of our illimitable subject matter, so effectively repressed or bypassed during recent decades, are no longer proscribed* (18, p. 783).

<sup>1</sup>An abbreviated version of this paper was read at the symposium on "Phenomenological Conceptions of Personality" at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, Chicago, Illinois, September 2, 1960.

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This theoretical openness I take as both a welcome and a challenge to a phenomenological psychology. The welcome resides in the fact that the liberalization of behaviorist epistemology has occurred in precisely those directions espoused over the years by phenomenologically-oriented workers in personality or in psychology at large; that is "it is the S-R theorists who have moved and the man-preoccupied systematists who have (relatively) stood still" (18, pp. 762-763). The challenge lies in the fact that opposition to behaviorism and dwelling on its shortcomings are no longer sufficient to vindicate phenomenology. There exists, instead, a requirement that phenomenologically-oriented theories develop concepts and techniques adequate to the furtherance of their program. Systematic attention must be given, for example, to the solution of methodological problems involved in coping with experiential and behavioral data within a single framework.

With this general perspective in mind, I want to examine some of the main issues in subject matter, orientation, and method involved in phenomenological approaches to the study of man. Consideration of these issues will, hopefully, provide more detailed elaboration of the current psychological scene and, thereby, increased justification for a phenomenological orientation.<sup>2</sup>

#### EXPERIENCE AS SUBJECT MATTER IN PSYCHOLOGY

The refusal or reluctance to treat experience as legitimate data for systematic analysis has recognizably been a main contributor to the attenuated image of man which has been inherited from recent decades of psychological formulations. Asch (2) speaks of the man of social psychology as a "quite dwarflike creature," and Allport (1), continuing his long struggle on this point, refers to the current image of man as a "caricature." What is communicated in these characterizations is a restless discontent with recent views of man, dissatisfaction with the impoverishment reflected by the omission of the relatively unique characteristics of human functioning: the rich diversity of thought and feeling, the awareness of being and the awareness of other beings and of *their* awareness of being, the wide-arching

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<sup>2</sup>It will forestall misunderstanding if the author acknowledges that his discussion of both the phenomenological and the behaviorist orientations will rely only upon certain modal or traditional characteristics of these approaches. Careful consideration of any specific theorist or any particular work within either approach would, of course, require lengthy qualification. The central concern here is with the historically-evident differences between the approaches in definition of variables, delimitation of data, and empirical strategy. The affirmation of a phenomenological orientation in this paper encompasses only those issues discussed.

concern with the future, the effort after meaning, especially in relatedness with others, and the quest for accomplishment in life.

A major focus on experience *as data* is one of the main differentia of the phenomenological orientation, which recognizes man as an experiencing being and concentrates, in contrast to behaviorism, on this subject-matter domain as a major problem for analysis and systematization.

Agreement with this position, more explicitly now than previously, may be found in statements of quite varied theorists. Thus Koehler refers to "our subject matter which (to a high degree) is human experience" (19, p. 733); Rogers calls the task of research "the persistent, disciplined effort to make sense and order out of the phenomena of subjective experience" (23, p. 188); and Murray affirms his interest in "direct expressions of and reports of interior experiences . . . as indications of occurrences that are intrinsically important" (20, p. 10). Murray stresses the need for treating experience as a *dependent* variable—something to be predicted—rather than simply as an intervening variable in the prediction of some non-experiential occurrence.

#### EXPERIENCE AND THE PROBLEM OF OBJECTIVITY

The positivistic demand for objectivity was interpreted as automatically excluding experiential data, since, unlike overt behavior or other external physical events, it was not, by definition, amenable to intersubjective direct observation. That this position may have been based on less than satisfactory logic is now becoming clearer. As Perkins (21) has noted, the positivistic approach has not provided a careful analysis of intersubjectivity. The rejection of experience as suitable data for science was predicated on the fact that experience is private. Yet the concept of intersubjectivity—agreement between observers of some public event—depends *entirely* upon experience, the experience of the observers. There seems to be no way to skirt the role of experience, even in the intersubjective agreement process.

It seems that the positivistic concern for objectivity led to a confusion between publicity and reliability, the latter being contingent upon *procedures for arriving at agreement* rather than upon the nature of the data. Experience can be shown to be a reliable and repeatable consequence of certain manipulations of the environment, and hence can be studied objectively when the term has this broader meaning. Looked at in this way—conceiving of experience as part of a network of lawfully related facts—it is no longer incompatible with contemporary views of objectivity.

As Feigl notes, mental states "are no longer inaccessible to confirmation, i.e., to indirect verification" (11, p. 124). Feigl goes further in undoing the restrictions

of early positivism with an open-armed welcome to all that was previously anathema to the objectivity requirement: "The reintroduction of introspectionism, the new concern with the phenomenal field, the clinical attention to subjective experience, the studies in social perception, etc. seem to me to indicate . . . an advance along the spiral . . . of the evolution of the scientific outlook" (11, p. 123).

#### REDUCTIONISM AND THE PROBLEM OF OBJECTIVITY

The early construal of objectivity with its stress on direct verification and direct and unambiguous linkage between concepts and empirical referents led, in addition to the banishment of experience, I believe, to a three-pronged flight into reductionism<sup>3</sup> in an effort to maintain methodological objectivity. The three forms of reductionism were: (a) behavioral—the employment of arbitrary (physical) micro-units of stimuli and responses, unlikely to enable *meaningful* constitution by the human organism; (b) physiological—employment of units logically remote from experiential significance for the human organism; and (c) phylogenetic—the use of lower organisms for whom language is, of course, unavailable.

The reduction strategy of psychological research was purchased at the cost of theoretical significance and representativeness to everyday life. The possibility that there was "no road back" from premature reductionism to the reconstitution of human behavior seems to have been of little concern until recently.

Two points are important here. (a) The reduction of any phenomenon into analytic units is part of the fabric of science. If reduction is to be successful, i.e., to enable reconstitution of the properties of the molar phenomenon, such properties should play a role in determining the nature of the reductive units. The importance of reduction "from above" has been emphasized frequently. Woodger (28) stresses the significance of beginning the analysis of anything with big units, in order that nothing important is omitted.

In the physical sciences, Hawkins points out that there is a question whether atomic theory or statistical mechanics would have been developed to their present levels without the guidance offered them by already developed bodies of phenomenological theory in chemistry and thermodynamics. "The essential point in both cases is that 'fundamental' theory is fruitful only as its application is guided by profound study, in their own right, of the phenomena which occur at levels of higher complexity" (14, p. 226).

<sup>3</sup>The problem of reductionism has been discussed in greater detail elsewhere (17).

(b) The relatively uncritical assumption of generality of animal findings to human behavior in the behaviorist search for objectivity is indeed startling when placed side by side with empirical studies showing the limitations of generality even of findings derived from humans themselves. But here too, changes are occurring which give full measure to the uniqueness of man, especially his possession of language, and the importance of studying him directly—again a part of the phenomenological orientation. The comparative psychologist Beach goes so far as to say: “These various considerations lead me to wonder whether it might not be desirable to explicitly restrict the concept of psychology solely to the study of human behavior” (4, p. 1).

#### MEANING IN THE DEFINITION OF VARIABLES

In a paper written some years ago (16) it was argued that the rapprochement of S-R psychology with phenomenological approaches might pivot around the definition of the stimulus *in psychological or meaningful terms*, since all stimuli were basically response-defined. The traditional reliance by S-R theory on physical definitions of stimuli was said to lend a spurious objectivity which could be maintained only at the cost of confinement to research with lower organisms or molecular processes. If this point were now generalized to include *response* variables as well, we would then be in agreement with some crucial generalizations in Koch’s summary of Study I.

First, there is noted the unanimous emphasis of all the personality and social psychologists on *psychological* definition of major systematic independent and dependent variables—involving specification of their inferred *meaning* for the organism. Second, even in S-R psychology, we find Guthrie asserting that stimuli must “have meaning for the responding organism” and denying “that the psychological description of behavior can be made in physical terms” (12, pp. 165-166). Finally, we may quote Koch:

If stimuli and responses are acknowledged to depend for their identification on the perceptual sensitivities of human observers, then the demand for something tantamount to a language of pointer readings . . . must be given up. . . . If, further, the requirement is asserted that S be specified in a way which includes its inferred meaning for the organism, then *any* basis for a difference in epistemological status between an S-R language and what has been called ‘subjectivistic’ language is eliminated (18, pp. 768-769).

The emphasis of the foregoing remarks is on the reference to *meaning* in the definition of variables. In so far as this obtains, to that extent has experience—not as a datum but as a frame of reference—become a central concern of psychological formulations.

## INVARIANCE AND THE LEVEL OF PSYCHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

The concern with experience, with meaning, or with definition of variables by reference to central states, would seem to have bearing on an issue of the most fundamental importance to a science of human nature—the search for high-order regularities or invariances. In oversimplified terms, the question is at what level, or between what kinds of conceptual end-terms, may *psychological* laws be most strategically sought?

As already pointed out, scrutiny of the properties of molar human behavior has been limited, and, instead, a strategy has, in large part, been taken over, by many workers, from essentially extrinsic sources—the natural sciences. That strategy has involved a search for invariance between *physical* descriptions of independent (stimulus) and dependent (response) variables, and cross-cutting this classification, between proximal stimulus and proximal response variables. The conceptual focus, then, has been upon *specifics* of input and output. Seeking invariances in human behavior at a higher level of complexity than has generally characterized this behaviorist strategy is now supportable on several grounds.

Perhaps most fundamental from an empirical point of view is the evidence for vicarious functioning<sup>4</sup>—the mutual substitutability of mediating processes—as a characteristic of organismic functioning, especially at higher levels of complexity. This substitutability may occur on both the input and the output side of the behavior process. Tolman, for example, in the final systematic statement of his career, asserts that: "What (the organism) learns is, in short, a *performance* and each such performance can usually be carried out by a number of different motor skills" (26, p. 133). On the stimulus side exactly parallel considerations can be seen to obtain as, for example, in the concept of *task* presented by Ryan (25) in a recent discussion of motivation. The notion of task, like the notion of performance, is not identifiable with any particular physical description of events, and can be mediated by a large variety of stimulus events. To the extent that vicarious functioning is a property of higher organismic functioning, as it clearly seems to be, to that extent is the search for invariance through the traditional emphasis upon peripheral and proximal definition unlikely to succeed.

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<sup>4</sup>The author is indebted to Kenneth R. Hammond for providing insight into the significance of the concept of vicarious functioning (cf. 13).

This position has been maintained primarily by Brunswik (6) in his emphasis upon—to use his own words—the study of distal function and its grand strategy, or the study of achievement and of its macromediation. Brunswik was well aware of the relation between an emphasis upon distal function and the role of psychological field concepts, concepts which imply a phenomenological orientation. In discussing the encapsulation of Lewin's system into the life space with relative neglect of peripheral or proximal input and output, Brunswik poignantly remarks: "Encapsulation into the central layer . . . may be the least harmful of all the limitations which possible could be imposed upon psychology. It may actually mean concentration upon the most essential phase in the entire process of life and of its ramifications. It may be the thing psychology has always been really after throughout its history" (5, p. 266). Heider, calling attention to this same issue, suggests that: "Only by referring (peripheral inputs and outputs) to the central layer can one obtain laws related to each other in a wider system. In themselves they . . . cannot be expected to have stability and invariance" (15, p. 111).

These considerations would seem to promise little for efforts after behavioral laws at molecular or micromediation levels, the levels of concentration of the behaviorist strategy of the past. On the contrary, invariance would seem most likely to obtain at the level of the "grand strategy" of the organism, a level of distal functioning. To cope effectively with distal functioning, input and output have to be defined with reference to an organism, and this type of definition is congruent with the postulation of central concepts such as life space, or meaningful environment.

Another way of looking at this problem leads similarly to the conclusion that psychological invariance most likely resides in or derives from the psychological field. In concentrating on micromediation processes, the scientist is faced with a large number of specifically differing items of input and output, each of which has a low probability of occurrence as compared with the probability of occurrence of the constitutive *class* to which the item might belong. The possibility of establishing laws on the basis of stimulus classes and response classes is thus greater than by seeking for regularities between specific items. The nature of the classes returns us to our concern for person-defined variables, i.e., one approach to constituting the classes in a way which has psychological import is to define them on the basis of similarity of *meaning* of the items for the person or persons concerned. Feigl (11) has raised this general argument in considering the possibilities of predicting particular versus gross features of behavioral events, and Roby (22), in a recent paper, alludes to this general problem in discussing the necessity for indifference or fungibility of most qualitative properties of events if general laws of behavior are to be achieved.

In general then, phenomenological concepts would seem to bear some relation to the nature of a successful strategy of law-finding in psychology.

#### THE CONCEPTUAL STATUS OF THE INDIVIDUAL

Phenomenologically-oriented approaches have traditionally laid great stress upon the individual, his uniqueness, and the importance of constructing an adequate account of him as an individual. The idiographic emphasis, while not, as far as I can see, a logically necessary consequence of the phenomenological orientation, stems largely from tradition and the strong clinical commitments of many of the adherents of that approach. They hold that study of the individual should be the *starting point* of the long process of building a science of psychology if that science is ultimately to be capable of accounting for individual behavior.

In contrast, behavioristically-oriented approaches have given remarkably little attention to the study of individuals and have considered that the individual should enter the long science-building process *only at its terminus*. The individual is expected then to be reconstituted at the intersection of a set of established relations among variables. There are several problems of methodology centering on this issue, the ultimate solution of which is admittedly not fully clear.

Kurt Lewin frequently described his efforts as an attempt to build a set of concepts which could lead to general laws of "exceptionless validity" and permit, *at the same time*, the construction of an individual case. Unique events—persons—are thereby considered lawful events and possible of derivation from the system of such concepts. This general view is not, on its face, different from the view held by the nomothetists. One difference, in practice however, is that *in the generation of his concepts*, Lewin had frequent recourse to individual study, and relied upon such study as an important *discovery context*.

There are serious problems with the whole strategy of attempting to constitute individuals from general laws, as these are sought in much of current research. I refer to the widely-used methodology of arriving at generalizations, and hypothesizing behavioral mechanisms, on the basis of studies of *group averages*. The usual approach is to build generalizations and even to establish parameter values on the basis of significant mean differences between averaged data from experimental groups. But it has been pointed out frequently that such an approach may not yield explanatory principles appropriate to the

behavior of any *individual* organism. For example, Cotton notes that Hull's equations involved parameter values characteristic of a population of similarly-treated, comparable animals, "but not necessarily characteristic of every (or perhaps any) animal in the population" (8, p. 312). Estes (10), in an experimental tour de force, shows how the very foundation-principle of learning, the associative process, has probably been misconstrued as an incremental rather than an all-or-none process by virtue of reliance upon group-average learning data rather than individual learning data.

Regarding the construction of *individual* laws of behavior and of their generality, what seems required is to consider the individual, as Rosenzweig has suggested, "as a world of events constituting a population, subject to both statistical analysis and dynamic conceptualization" (24, p. 213). To this individual universe of events Rosenzweig has given the term "idioverse." Conceived in this manner, there seems no in-principle objection to studying individuals for the purpose of establishing individual laws. Said otherwise, there is no intrinsic implication that study of an individual can only be for applied interests.

The basic question, then, is what is the *generality across persons* of the established functional relation, irrespective of whether it is initially derived from study of an individual or from study of a group. The basic answer must be sought empirically. To dismiss individual study as *a priori* incapable of generality is unwarranted.

#### THE ROLE OF NATURALISTIC OBSERVATION

Field theory and Gestalt psychology have been characterized as, in part, a revolt "against the prevailing tendency to prejudge the nature of psychological phenomena by imposing *a priori* dicta concerning the properties they must have" (7, p. 11). This statement pinpoints a major characteristic of the phenomenological position in psychology, a commitment to generating the terms of a language of description and analysis by direct observation of indigenous psychological phenomena—the phenomena of everyday experience and action of human organisms in social settings over time. Although observation probably never can proceed without some prior ordering categories, there is a difference of some importance in the source and nature of these prior conceptions, in the tentativeness with which they are held, and in the readiness to modify or discard them in light of continuing observation. There is an increasing refrain in contemporary psychology to the effect that further progress is contingent upon

significant observational analyses of behavior under natural conditions. One writer, for example, concludes that: "Careful observation, recording, and measurement of naturally occurring events and of 'experiments of nature' will for a long time to come be the most important *source* of the significant problems of psychology" (7, p. 81).

The aversion to naturalistic observation seems to be waning. The gradual dropping of the extrinsically-derived variables of physics, which may violate the natural topography of psychological phenomena, is one important sign. Perhaps the comment of Guthrie best illustrates the point: "Practically all research results in prediction, but if it is merely the prediction of how rats will behave under certain complicated conditions found only in a number of psychological laboratories, we have not furthered knowledge or science" (12, p. 173).

If this, and the preceding sections of this paper, suggest that failure to make substantial progress toward the reconstruction of human nature may be partly attributed to reliance upon inappropriate concepts, then it may not be presumptuous to suggest that the current "attitude of deduction" be at least partly replaced by an "attitude of discovery" of appropriate variables.

The "attitude of discovery" would have to focus upon experience, and upon behavior and environment—but the latter two in what Murray refers to as "man-pertinent" terms. The success of the ethologists is encouraging to those who have been disillusioned with the ambiguities of clinical or anthropological observation.

A commitment to naturalistic observation of human activity does not, of course, mean that psychology has to surrender its status as an experimental science. Rather it suggests that the variables utilized in experimental inquiry emerge from or be referred to observations of naturally occurring behavior, in a continuing effort to remain in contact with the empirical world. It suggests too, that the designs of experiments give more attention to representing the natural context of human behavior—a context of linguistic symbols and social interaction.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

The foregoing represents an effort to consider seven issues relevant to the phenomenological orientation in personality and psychology. They are not to be considered independent of each other by any means. None of the issues is seen as fully resolved, and all are seen as requiring further philosophical and psychological analyses. A critique of

the phenomenological orientation—for example, of its frequent concentration upon inner feelings at the expense of adequate conceptualization of the environment (cf. 9)—has been omitted as being beyond the scope of the present paper.

The various implications for research suggested by the logic of these considerations can be touched upon only briefly. (a) There seems to be need for development of a more adequate methodology of observation if the latter is to play a central role in furthering the phenomenological program and avoid the pitfalls of sheer subjectivism. The efforts of Barker and Wright (3) seem to be a useful beginning. (b) Experiments are needed which allow the natural characteristics of behavior to emerge. In general, the important point here is the avoidance of unnecessarily restricted experimental paradigms—restricted in time-span; restricted in the possibility for choice among alternative responses, including the manifestation of creativity; or restricted in scope of the field and, therefore, of the number of variables allowed to vary in the situation. (c) There is need for large-scale, long-term research which investigates significant categories of behavior within the full context of the social forces from which it emerges. We can only agree with Murray that “no theoretical system constructed on the psychological level will be adequate until it has been embraced by and intermeshed with a cultural-sociological system” (20, p. 45). The events in which the personality theorist is usually interested are extended in social time and are part of a web of interpersonal actions. The very perimeters or boundaries of these macro-events or proceedings can only be defined or articulated by reference to the social context.

One point of this paper is that the current psychological scene provides both a welcome and a challenge. In these merely programmatic comments about research, and in the theoretical gaps left in the body of the paper, lies part of the challenge. Slaying the behaviorist dragon is no longer sufficient to gain the laurels of phenomenological knighthood. Only hard work will do.

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