

PERSONALITY IN TRANSACTIONAL PSYCHOLOGY¹

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The term personality as ordinarily used would seem to refer to perceived regularities in individual behavior, regularities that appear to have explanatory or predictive value for future behavior. When the regularities are perceived in the phenomenal self, they are generally equated with the self-concept. Perhaps the most common application of the term personality is, however, to the perceived regularities in another person.

We may further distinguish between personality as experienced and personality as described. It is a commonplace, readily accepted, to state that personality *as described* is an abstraction which should not be confused with "reality," simply because language is necessarily an imperfect tool which can never perfectly reflect personality as experienced. Less commonly accepted is the proposition that personality of the self or other *as experienced* is equally an abstraction, has no locus in either self or other, and consists of a set of probabilities or predictions. Personality, no matter how defined, can refer only to a certain class of social constancies which we ourselves create and make use of in our dealings with others. Although social constancies are far more complex and generally much less stable than object constancies, such as size constancy and color constancy, the principles of their origin and their operation in behavior rest on common functional ground.

CONSTANCIES

"Constancy" is a term used here for simplifying analysis and communication. It is a static abstraction, a slice in time from what is more aptly called continuity. In life there are no constancies; instead there is what Ames has called "form in flow."³

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²I am deeply indebted to Hadley Cantril for the discussions we have had on this topic. I am sure he will not mind if I say that in many respects this paper is a joint effort.

³The idea of personality constancy as continuity or "form in flow" was expressed by Adler in the following words: "Everyone carries within himself . . . a law of movement which keeps fast hold of him without his understanding it. . . . The law of movement in the mental life of a person is the decisive factor for his individuality. . . . Although it was necessary to freeze the movement in order to see it as form, we have always maintained the viewpoint that all is movement" (*The Individual Psychology of Alfred Adler*, p. 195).—Ed. note.

In order to show this continuity of development and function, let us begin our analysis with object constancies in visual perception, a detour which may at first appear unrelated to personality, but which I feel is necessary in an explanation of the place of personality in transactional psychology.

As I write this, across the desk from me is a table which I perceive as being upright, three-dimensional, as having a rectangular top, etc. Now, as I move my head back and forth, I continue to perceive the table as upright, three-dimensional, with a rectangular top, in spite of the fact that with each movement of my head or body or eyes, the impingements on my organism related to that "object" have gone through a bewildering variety of changes. Clearly, there is no constancy here as far as sensory input is concerned and Ames' demonstrations (3, 6, 8) as well as a number of experiments (e. g., 2, 4, 7, 8, 9) have shown that I cannot attribute this constancy simply to the fact that there "is" a table there. The constancy of the table is an abstraction based on past experience with similar impingements.

Prognostic function. Why abstract in this particular way? Why abstract at all? The answer, growing out of our research, would appear to be that the abstraction "table" is, functionally speaking, a prognostic directive for action. The attributed tableness of the object gives us a generalized prognosis as to the probable consequences of a general class of ways of dealing with the object as we abstract it out of its surroundings. For example, the general ranges or classes of possibilities based on past experience, which are related to a table as compared to a pencil, are quite different. There is implicit in my perception the prognosis that I can lift the table, sit on it, push it, turn it over, break it, etc.

But the constancy of the table also functions in other ways. This hinges on the fact that without it I am unable to relate myself to the table satisfactorily in time or space. It is an aspect of human behavior that we act not in terms of what "is," but in terms of a prediction of what "will be" at the projected point in time at which we expect our act to take effect on whatever it is we are dealing with, whether an object or a person. E. g., when we catch a baseball, we do not reach for the ball. We reach for the point in space where we predict the ball will be at a given time. Things are constantly changing, and our acts cannot be instantaneous, with the result that successful action can only occur in terms of a projection in time, that is, a prognosis of what will be. This is equally true for quite stable situa-

tions; a prognosis of no change or of little change is just as much of a prognosis as one of great change.

Object constancy, then, appears to serve two functions in prognosis: It provides a generalized prognosis and a basis for assessing the probable consequences of a particular act. To return to the example of the table, my unique acts toward it become possible only by virtue of my particular prognosis as to where I am in relation to the table at the projected instant in time at which the act is to occur, and my generalized prognosis as to what function the table can serve. These prognoses, in turn, are only possible in terms of differences in impingements on my organism which can be attributed to a change, *not in the table and not in me*, but to a change in the spatial relationships between me and the table. A number of the Ames demonstrations verify the accuracy of this analysis by reversing the circumstances: By changing the position of the "object" but leaving the pattern of impingements on the organism constant, no perceived alteration in spatial relationship between object and organism occurs (5, 6, 7). My action is not due to any changes in the table or in myself alone: my action involves a functional relationship.

"Self" and "other" constancies. And so it is, that in order to have any prognosis for a unique act one must have not only constancy in whatever one is acting toward, but *self constancy* as well. It follows that constancies, both of the externality and of the self, provide the basis for the unique assessment of unique relationships necessary for an act which is itself always unique. To the extent that either constancy breaks down, differences may be referred to alteration in the "other" or in the "self."

Thus, there are no concrete absolutes in perception; instead, what is perceived may roughly be described as a series of functional probabilities or "best bets." But these are treated as absolutes in everyday behavior, despite their abstract and non-absolute nature. Cantril puts it this way:

While we may realize intellectually as scientists and psychologists that the happenings around us and our own perceptions, prehensions, actions and valuing, are only probabilities, still we must behave in our everyday life *as if* some probable happenings are certainties. For we couldn't *act*, we couldn't survive if we did not make some definite fixed assumptions. For example, in carrying on the process of living, we have to assume as we are crossing a street, that what we perceive as an oncoming car *is* an oncoming car; we *have* to assume that certain friends *are* loyal, that certain people *are* honest; we have to assume that certain things *are* the right things to do and that certain things *are* wrong. Hence we tend to make absolutes out of probabilities in order to act effectively (4, p. 17).

If this analysis is correct, then any instance of behavior involves:

(a) a generalized prognosis with respect to the externalities; that is, a general class of probable consequences, a general class of acts. This may be summarized as attributed "other" constancy.

(b) a generalized prognosis concerning the self; that is, a generalized class of possibilities of acting. This may be summarized as "self" constancy.

(c) a unique relationship between these two, projected forward in time. This should not be understood as a single projection, but rather a projection in sequential form—a process, a continuance.

It seems likely that constancy of the self is primary and may roughly be defined as the sum total of the estimates one has, based on past experience, of one's own capacities to deal with particular sets of impingements. "Other" constancy would seem to consist primarily of the referral of a class of these capacities to the world outside the self—the phenomenal other.

Social constancies. We further need to discriminate between what one might call the constancies in the "object" realm and the constancies in the "social" realm. Additional factors come into play when we start dealing with other people, factors which tend to reduce the reliability of prediction. If we are to establish functionally effective constancies of the self and of others, we must deal with the purposes of other people, the prehension of sequential events they are following in order to achieve certain purposes, and the constant change and flexibility in both of these, together with the fact that as we react to others and as they interact with us we are affecting each other's purposive behavior and modifying the sequential events leading to goals. Social living is never static; it is always flow.

PERSONALITY

In transactional theory, then, personality is thought of as a class of social constancies. When attention is directed to those aspects of the phenomenal self which are perceived as having a social referent, there emerge the abstractions which, when organized into a more or less coherent pattern, comprise personality from the first-person point of view. *First-person personality*, that is, one's own personality as perceived by the self, is Allport's "ego as object of knowledge" (1, p. 454), embodying those aspects with a social referent, and referring

particularly to predictions as to how the responses of others will be perceived. It is an organization of social self constancies.

When attention is directed to the other person, we may similarly define personality as the significance an individual has for others because of their perception of a sufficiently consistent pattern in his behavior to enable them to feel they can make some reliable interpretation of it in terms of their own purposes. Thus *third-person personality* is a class of other constancies with a specific social referent.

SOME IMPLICATIONS

After this attempt to make clear how personality fits conceptually into transactional psychology, let me present a few illustrative implications.

1. First-person personality and third-person personality, while phenomenally separate and real, are abstracted aspects of the same total process. Self and otherness cannot be perceived apart from one another. No individual can perceive a consistent pattern of behavior in others apart from what he himself brings to the occasion—his values, purposes, and experience-based assumptions concerning his own interpersonal capacities and tendencies. Similarly, no individual can perceive in himself socially relevant, consistent patterns of behavior apart from the perceived responses of others. Thus, personality does not exist in its own right, but has meaning only in terms of a social transaction.

2. The therapist should have sharp awareness that the personality of the client, phenomenally a property of the client, is a function of a transaction involving therapist, client and situation. Personality change, the aim of therapy, also has meaning only in terms of such a transactional relationship. Personality change does not reside exclusively in the individual. The easy assumption that it does, is deceptive and therapeutically sterile. Personality, its expression, change and measurement are interpersonal transactional phenomena.

3. It would seem from this analysis that the starting point for creating useful abstractions as a means of describing personality should be a consideration of what behaviors are significant in an interpersonal sense in the culture in which communication about personality is to occur. Once the decision has been made concerning the types or classes of behavior which have significance, the next step is to try to abstract out underlying variables which can be inferred from an

observed pattern of behavior. One might suppose that there would be a hierarchy of such variables with respect to the range of significant behavior in a variety of cultures for which they have predictive and explanatory value. Perhaps most broadly significant in this sense as descriptive attributes of personality are values, abilities, and capacities which have interpersonal significance in one's culture. Abilities and capacities are important because, in a sense, they set the limits of what the individual can do, and thus increase the prognostic reliability of our estimates of what the individual will do. Coupled with these, a knowledge of his values tells us something about what he will do, given the opportunity. We do not propose, however, that it takes only these to yield a reliable system. Many other variables are important, including temperament, energy level, capacity for growth and development and how it is canalized, inclusiveness of the self, areas of concern, and undoubtedly many others not yet conceived by anyone.

The essential point is to begin with socially significant behavior and proceed to underlying variables. Not only is this approach conceptually sound, but because it introduces the factor of validity at the beginning, it should provide a healthy corrective to the large body of personality studies which virtually ignore the problem of validity.

4. As stated above, the social constancies of self and other serve as reference points for assessing change and providing the predictive sequence necessary for action. To the degree that constancy of self, or other, or both self and other are inadequate, there is inability to assess change, with consequent loss of predictive reliability and a tendency for action to be inhibited or less effective. A certain lack of predictive reliability is the spice of life and is a necessary counterpart of new experience, of learning, of emergence. But also associated with predictive unreliability are tension, stress, and feelings of uncertainty which, in the extreme, may so inhibit the capacity to assess change, as to result in either an inability to act or an inability to act appropriately.

When the individual in his dealings with others has his predictions upset, this tends to be reflected in an alteration of the personal estimate he has of his own capacities and the reliability of these estimates. In the extreme, it can lead to loss of self constancy, or the regression to or fixation on inappropriate forms. Thus it would seem that personality breakdown and personality development and emergence are two sides of the same coin.

5. Perhaps this helps to cast some light on why people tend to react as they do to deviant individuals. It would seem that deviant individuals in a very real sense upset the self constancy of all other members in society who participate with them. Since we can tolerate only so much upsetting of our self constancies if we are to retain our capacity to act effectively, we take measures designed to restore predictability. Child training and socialization and, in fact, much of our cultural form might profitably be considered from this point of view.

6. It seems probable that in much of therapy the problem is in the establishment or re-establishment of appropriate and stable, socially related self constancies. But this cannot occur without perceived constancy of response from others, since self constancy is but an abstracted aspect of a transaction which includes otherness. Perhaps, then, in such cases, the main task of the therapist is to be consistent, to be a constant social other who provides the social predictability necessary to the establishment in the client of stable and adequate self constancies. It may matter little whether the therapist is directive or non-directive, as long as he is consistent and predictable, and either acceptant or positive enough in his response to encourage the social process of therapy.

One would guess though, that consistency and predictability are more likely to be attained by the therapist who is non-directive and acceptant than by one who is directive and judgmental. For a therapist to succeed in offering a series of directions and judgments which are consistent from the clients point of view, argues a speed and depth of understanding of the client's phenomenal world that would be extremely difficult to achieve.

SUMMARY

In transactional theory, personality is thought of as a class of social constancies. Any instance of behavior involves a generalized prognosis with respect to the externalities (attributed "other" constancy), a generalized prognosis concerning the self ("self" constancy), and a unique relationship between these two, projected forward in time. *First-person personality*, that is, one's own personality as perceived by the self, is an organization of social *self* constancies. *Third-person personality*, the personality of the phenomenal other, is a class of *other* constancies with a specific social referent. Some brief illustrative examples of the implications of this view for personality theory, measurement, and therapy are offered.

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 AN OLD LADY

Mattie, eighty, lives alone.
 Ex-everything but personality,
 A culmination of sanity and balance
 That lives within a dried and withered skin.
 Cats, humor, heat, and independence are her friends,
 Two farm families are watchers
 Of her guessing game with death.

Let the psychologists make haste to her abode
 Before it is too late.
 Let them make note of how she ripened into this sweet
 and puckered fruit.
 Let them put their findings in an authoritative volume
 Written entertainingly in words the layman can understand.
 I will be among the first to buy the book.

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